EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE

Tuesday 2 December 2003
(*Morning*)

Session 2

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EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE

9th Meeting 2003, Session 2

CONVENER

*Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Margaret Smith (Edinburgh West) (LD)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Shiona Baird (North East Scotland) (Green)
*Frances Curran (West of Scotland) (SSP)
*Marlyn Glen (North East Scotland) (Lab)
*Marilyn Livingstone (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)
*Campbell Martin (West of Scotland) (SNP)
*Mrs Nanette Milne (North East Scotland) (Con)
*Elaine Smith (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)

COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTES

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green)
Carolyn Leckie (Central Scotland) (SSP)
Tricia Marwick (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
Mr Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING GAVE EVIDENCE:

Richard Hamer (Ownership Options)
Michelle Hegarty (Capability Scotland)
Heather Middleton (Fife College)
Jackie Cairns (Fife College)
Drena O'Malley (Deafblind Scotland)
Marie Burns (Glasgow Association for Mental Health)
Jim MacLeod (Inverclyde Council on Disability)

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Ruth Cooper

ASSISTANT CLERK

Roy McMahon

LOCATION

Glasgow Marriot Hotel

Scottish Parliament

Equal Opportunities Committee

Tuesday 2 December 2003

(*Morning*)

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 11:40*]

European Year of Disabled People

The Convener (Cathy Peattie): I welcome everybody to the ninth meeting this session of the Equal Opportunities Committee. In particular, I welcome Richard Hamer of Ownership Options, Michelle Hegarty of Capability Scotland, and Heather Middleton and Jackie Cairns of Fife College of Further and Higher Education. We will go straight to questions. Panel members should feel free to answer any of the questions that members put to them—I ask them to indicate if they want to contribute an answer. Clearly, different organisations may have different perspectives on a particular issue.

I will kick off. What projects have you been involved in as part of the European year of disabled people 2003? What were your project's key achievements this year? Have any lessons been learned that you can use in future?

Heather Middleton (Fife College): I work in the marketing department of Fife College. The college has had a lot to do with disability. We have a disability strategy group that has been going for about four years and which has undertaken a number of projects. At the end of last year, we discussed a video project that could involve our students, volunteers and employees who work with our disabled students and with other people who have disabilities.

We put the video project forward for EYDP funding and got about £5,000 from the Department for Work and Pensions. The intention was to showcase profiles of students with disabilities. We pulled the video together on a day-in-the-life-of theme, using Jackie Cairns, who is one of our higher national diploma practical journalism students.

Lessons have been learned from the project. We found that a lot of students were keen to participate in the video. We worked with our learning support co-ordinators and academics to find people who would be interested in participating in the project. The project generated a lot of good will on the part of our students and a lot of interest in the college.

The video is at the final editing stage. It will raise awareness about things that our students have to deal with on a day-to-day basis. The video opens with Jackie coming to college. The college has a £12.2 million redevelopment on the go and in the video Jackie talks about some of the things that we have had to address in our new-build project.

A lot of colleges, including Angus College and Edinburgh's Telford College, have similar new-build projects on the go. We can show them that we have looked at the work that is involved in new-build projects from the perspective of people with disabilities.

The Convener: It would be nice if the committee could have a look at the video when it is finished.

Heather Middleton: Yes.

The Convener: Do you want to add anything Jackie?

Jackie Cairns (Fife College): I will just say something about my experience of being a part-time student at Fife College. I am in my third year and I am doing my HND part time. I have no sight. The journalism course is a wonderful challenge, as is the opportunity to be involved in so many aspects of the college. I am involved not only in the video but also in the college's disability strategy group, which Heather Middleton mentioned, and in other things. It has been a really exciting time for me; far better that I expected when I set out down the road to do the course. I never expected that things would come this far.

The video has been really worth while. As Heather said, it highlights the needs of disabled people. It also raises awareness. It makes other people in the college—other students, staff and all the people who work with students—aware of our needs.

During the present building work, we have had health and safety officers running all over the place to check that people are safe and that various entrances and exits can be accessed by wheelchair users and anyone who needs to get in and out of the building safely. It has been quite an eventful time, but I will always look back on it with fondness.

The Convener: Thank you. I invite Michelle Hegarty to speak about her organisation.

11:45

Michelle Hegarty (Capability Scotland): Good morning. Capability Scotland's project for the European year of disabled people, which focused on the theme of promoting rights and aspirations, was called vote 2003. As its name suggests, the project was all about access and participation for disabled people in the elections in 2003. We were lucky to secure Community Fund moneys to support the project but, although we did not use EYDP money, it was very much focused on the themes of the year.

The project worked in two ways. First, it sought to ensure that people were aware of their rights in relation to voting and that they were empowered to take part in the voting process, which is not the most modern of processes and, in many ways, is fairly inaccessible to many people with disabilities—in fact, it is fairly inaccessible to many people, full stop. Secondly, we worked with election teams and bodies such as the Disability Rights Commission and the Electoral Commission to consider how we could inform best practice and to examine access to the electoral process in the widest sense.

One of the key parts of the project that we picked up on, which again fitted in well with the themes of the EYDP, was to do with encouraging young disabled people to take part in the electoral process. We organised a series of events for young disabled people and we had a virtual polling station on our website, which was the first of its kind in the United Kingdom. It encouraged people to go in and have a virtual voting experience so that they would be more prepared for what to do on the day. That was very successful. As well as running a number of activities, the project also did a survey on polling day on 1 May, in which 8 per cent of the participants were young people under 25. We feel that the project was successful in reaching what can be quite a difficult target audience.

The project was beneficial in a number of ways and provided good learning. We carried out the disability access review part of the Electoral Commission's report into the 2003 elections. That report, which was launched just a couple of weeks ago, contains a series of recommendations on equal access to the democratic process. I hope that those recommendations will be progressed through electoral reform.

In addition, there was a lot of learning locally among local authorities and election teams. In our report, we said that the 2003 elections were probably the most accessible elections that have ever been held in Scotland. Significant improvements were made, many of which were to do with the fact that election teams were really geared up to examine equal access issues. The places that tend to be used as polling stations are schools, community halls and places that people tend to go to every other day of the week. In the long term, we hope that the benefit and the learning gained from the access improvements that we made for polling day will be carried on. Given that election teams are made up mainly of council officials, we also hope that that learning will be carried on through their work.

A series of recommendations has come out of the project and we would be happy to send a full copy of the report to the committee.

The Convener: Thank you—we would welcome that.

Richard Hamer (Ownership Options): Ownership Options is particularly interested in housing for disabled people and we often end up focusing on ownership issues. It is no secret that, generally, many disabled people cannot find suitable housing, because there is an undersupply of adapted housing overall and, within the social housing sector, council houses and housing association properties are not being built fast enough to deal with the needs of disabled people. Many houses cannot be adapted to meet the changing needs of the people who live in them.

The only option for many disabled people is to buy their own home. Both the Government in Scotland and the UK Government have implemented a number of ways of allowing disabled people to buy their own home but, unfortunately, the process presents disabled people with huge problems. Those problems are usually related to the ability of disabled people not only to get the finances together to buy a home but to cover the extra cost of buying a home that disabled people face. There are issues to do with legal capacity and buying that relate to people who have learning disabilities and mental health problems as well as visible disabilities, and with finding a house through an estate agent that advertises the fact that the house is accessible or is capable of being adapted so that it becomes accessible.

For our project for the year, we joined together with the Disabled Persons Housing Service network in Scotland, which works around housing issues, to provide information to people who work with disabled people—and to disabled people themselves—about how to overcome barriers. That work was aimed not just at helping disabled people but at helping organisations such as Capability Scotland, mortgage lenders, estate agents and lawyers to know which information it was their duty to have and to provide.

Our project was well funded—I acknowledge the funding that came from the EYDP—and it is still in development because, at an early stage, we realised that in order to give the greatest number of people access to that information, regardless of their disability or where they live, the best place to put the information was on the internet. We are finishing off the development of a website that is simple to use on a self-service basis and which explains the problems and helps people to understand how to help a disabled person to buy a house, or, if they are disabled, how they can buy a house themselves.

The Convener: Do you think that having a European year of disabled people is a viable way of improving the situation for disabled people and of raising awareness? What, if anything, has the year done to improve the lives of people with disabilities?

Richard Hamer: Anything that highlights the issues that disabled people face is a good thing; therefore, the EYDP has been a good thing. Awareness of the year among the general public has not been as good as it could have been, and that has been acknowledged in different ways. However, awareness raising is a difficult thing to do. I firmly support the decision of the Department for Work and Pensions to employ a public relations company to assist projects such as ours to get information and stories into the media. Unfortunately, it is not an interesting subject for the media—they do not want to pick up on disabled people's stories. That is a real problem. That being so, alternative ways have to be found, and there could perhaps have been more direct spending by the Government on putting information about the issues in places that people go to, perhaps through an advertising campaign.

Essentially, the European year of disabled people was a good idea. The challenge is to make it flow and continue into future years. The only way to do that is to marry it, hand in hand, with the work of the Disability Rights Commission. For many people—especially the private companies that we deal with—there is some confusion because the Disability Rights Commission was pushing the legislative side of things and the European year of disabled people was pushing the issues around disabled people. Anything that could draw those two approaches closer together in the future would be useful.

Jackie Cairns: The year has, in many respects, been very good and worth while; however, I agree with what Richard Hamer said about the media. It would have been great if the year had had a higher profile on TV and radio—for instance, through a series of documentaries—and for it to have got into the public domain in that way. I feel that that has not happened, for whatever reason—it just has not had a high profile in the media. As a student who has to keep up with the news on a daily basis, I have to agree that it is a shame that the year has not had that high profile.

I wrote a piece for our student magazine highlighting the European year of disabled people, as nobody else knew about it. People asked me, "What is that?" and, "Can you tell me about the European year of disabled people?" Nobody seemed to know about it outside the organisations that were carrying out work for it or representing disabled people's groups. That is my concern. There needs to be more emphasis on raising awareness in the future.

Michelle Hegarty: It was probably impossible for the European year of disabled people to achieve the ambitions that people with a disability and organisations working around disability issues would have had for it, as its resources were limited.

The "see me" campaign has been very successful in changing attitudes. If we take into account the amount of resources and the number of organisations working on something like that, it puts a one-off European year on disability issues in perspective. We should view the year as a launch pad from which we can kick-start our thinking about what we do next, which is obviously what the committee is considering.

There are achievements that have been less tangible than some of the various funded programmes, activities and events that were organised around the year. Some stem from a variety of organisations in the disability sector coming together and working together, even if they have not traditionally done so in the past. There is no umbrella organisation for the disability sector, and a lot of people in it do not have any place where they can come together, focus their energies and discuss and agree policies and approaches. The year provided a focus for organisations to come together, and there has been a lot more networking and partnership working. I hope that that can be sustained after the year finishes.

We should recognise that there is something of a fledgling spirit among many other bodies not involved in the European year of disabled people, as they start to pick up on ideas around rights and as they make efforts to include people with a disability and their views and opinions. I set out in our submission some of the things that have happened or which have been taken forward as a result of the focus that was provided through the European year of disabled people.

There are some good examples of that. The Justice Department is doing some work on hate crimes, and it has engaged with disability organisations from the outset in developing consultation on that. Scottish Enterprise has not traditionally addressed disability—in fact, disability is not even mentioned in the enterprise strategy—but it is starting to focus on how the strategy can tackle some of the issues around the employment and self-employment of people with disabilities. The year is something of a kick start in many ways, and a lot more should happen in the aftermath of the year as a result of the focus that I have just described.

Marlyn Glen (North East Scotland) (Lab): My question has already partly been answered by everyone on the panel, but it is on how successful the year has been in raising public awareness. I can see that you are quite critical about that, but has there been any success in that regard? You talked about how the raising of public awareness can be taken forward. Would you like to add anything on that?

Richard Hamer: There are a number of areas where the European year of disabled people was very useful for us. It provided a body of support behind our work, which was particularly useful for our relations with public sector organisations. There was awareness within the Scottish Executive and local authorities that something was going on with regard to disabilities that needed support. For example, research is going on as we speak in relation to the need for a new grant to support disabled people in home ownership, which is a really positive thing. It would have been harder to push for that if it had not been for the European year of disabled people. The single-seller survey, which is being introduced, has a disability access element to it. That was a hard-fought case, but the European year of disabled people really assisted with that.

I would certainly not decry the year, and I agree with Michelle Hegarty that it has provided a number of low-key, not-so-visible links between people. It has also provided networks and activities that, although we might not always see them, have been very important.

Heather Middleton: I would like to have seen more big national companies getting involved. For example, if the Bank of Scotland or Sainsbury's had given their backing that would have made it possible to raise the profile of an event. Sainsbury's has chains of stores around the country, and it could have had displays on the European year of disabled people. People go shopping on a weekly or monthly basis, and we were looking to get the message about the year to people in the course of their normal, daily lives. I would like more to be done through that sort of mechanism in future.

Marlyn Glen: Given that the year is now concluding, it seems important to assess what has been achieved by the funded projects. How will you feed back your experiences to the Department of Trade and Industry and the Scottish Executive?

Heather Middleton: We will produce a formal report on the video. We will conduct some research and evaluation surveys and organise focus groups of able-bodied students and students who have disabilities and other difficulties. We will also get feedback from careers advisers and people in various organisations who will be using the video to deal with their clients.

12:00

Michelle Hegarty: The formal report on vote 2003 will be finished by next week. That will set out everything that happened during our project and will contain a series of recommendations. As I said, the disability access section of the Electoral Commission's report was based on the findings of Capability Scotland's review of disabled access in elections.

We are also considering the steps that we should take next. The next elections are the European elections, which might provide an opportunity to try out new methods of voting. We are going to consider how we can improve on Scotland's pretty good record on access to the electoral process and examine the implications for people with a disability of new methods of voting. We would like to continue our work among those with disabilities to try to engage young people and those who have not voted before. For example, a lot of people who live in residential homes or schools are not registered to vote.

Richard Hamer: We will report back formally to the Department for Work and Pensions about how we spent the money and how the information and training are being provided. The outcome and whether it really helps are what we are interested in. Earlier this year, in conjunction with the Margaret Blackwood Housing Association, we conducted a major piece of research into the problems that disabled people face when trying to get access to decent housing. I hope that you will see a change as a result of our work and that further research into the area will result in disabled people having greater knowledge about buying property and a greater ability to buy.

Jackie Cairns: Our video should encourage other people with disabilities to go to college. After all, it does not matter how old you are or what your circumstances are—if you want to learn, you should be able to. Our video is a great way of encouraging anybody with any sort of learning difficulty, disability, problem or whatever you want to call it—however people want to be tagged—to take advantage of the opportunities that are open to them. The video is called "Inspiring All to Learn" and I hope that we can send that message strongly when it is launched in January. People should be encouraged to take education by the throat and use it to their advantage.

The Convener: I like that phrase.

Margaret Smith (Edinburgh West) (LD): The European Commission stated its wish that the European year of disabled people should reinforce the co-operation between all parties involved in the area, including Government, social partners, social services, the voluntary sector and people with disabilities and their families. Has that happened in Scotland in the past year? What more can be done in that regard? Critically, what can be done to ensure that disabled people are given a greater voice in decision making?

Richard Hamer: In relation to housing policy, the views of people with disabilities are often not heard early enough in the process. This year, in relation to a number of pieces of legislation and work on the housing improvement taskforce, for example, there has been a lack of early discussions with disabled people about what they need, particularly with regard to the specific issues of access to housing and the housing adaptations grant regime.

There is a bit of me that says that disabled people should not have to say anything about certain housing issues because the legislation that is in place means that there are rules that should be followed. However, research that we did earlier this year shows that disabled people continue to have a problem finding housing despite the duties that housing providers have. There are times when disabled people need to be brought around the table from the start and asked about issues that affect them. There are other times when they simply need to get what is due to them.

Michelle Hegarty: There is a need for better consultative networks for the disability sector. The Scottish Executive set up a steering group for the European year of disabled people, which considered the matter a great deal. I hope that that piece of work will be considered after the year is officially concluded this month.

As I pointed out, there are limited opportunities for those in the sector to come together and focus their thinking, particularly around policy initiatives and legislation. At the moment, it is up to individual organisations to get in touch with one another.

A lot of difficult thinking about the way forward is required. I do not have a suggestion for how that should be done, but it would require people from the sector to come together and look at how we can set up better consultative networks so that the sector can express what can sometimes be differing opinions. Such networks should also try to inform what the Scottish Parliament is doing and to respond to the agenda that the Scottish Parliament sets. That is one of the areas of co-operation that still needs more work after the European year of disabled people concludes.

On engaging young people with a disability, we have recently written a report called “Nobody Ever Wants To Play With Me”, which the committee has received. The report notes the lack of opportunity for young people with a disability to engage in some mainstream activities, to have a voice and to express an opinion. In addition to that, it is difficult for them to take part in ordinary out-of-school activities, after-school clubs and places where young people can go to build their confidence and interact with other young people. That area could be a focus for the committee’s attention after the EYDP concludes officially.

Elaine Smith (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab): I am pleased that you have commented on the issues that affect young people. At the start of the year, our predecessor committee took evidence from witnesses who identified particular concerns relating to young people, their inclusion in the EYDP and access to education and employment. You have all given us a flavour of what happened with young people on your projects during the year, but how might things be moved forward if the funding for particular projects is now finished, for example? Where do we go from here? I want to know a little more about the Capability Scotland project on voting. How do you proceed with that if the funding has finished?

Michelle Hegarty: That is a good question. The funding from the community fund was for the year of the project, which finished at the end of October. One of the things that we are looking at now is how we can make progress.

We have a long history of working on access to elections. We started doing research into the area in 1997 and we are now on our fourth piece of research. That project represents the culmination of all the learning from our previous research. It has been obvious from our work that many issues, such as access to voting and the new pilot methods of voting, can be addressed in general, but the issue of young people becoming engaged as voters should be addressed in particular.

During the project, we used a variety of mechanisms to try to get to young people. For example, we sent out information to schools where we knew that young people with a disability would be studying the election process as part of their curriculum—the *Official Report* of debates was also used. We attended a number of conferences that engaged young people with learning and physical disabilities and we also had three sessions where we engaged directly with young people with a disability on how to go about voting, why they should vote, what to do on voting day and how they would make up their minds about whom to vote for.

What we learned was useful to the organisation. We uncovered a number of young people who are denied the opportunity even to register to vote because other people decide for them that they do not need to vote. I think that that is sad. We are keen to examine that area in future. We may get funding from a different source to do projects on how people come on to the register and subsequently access their right to vote.

In addition, we are keen to see how the pilots for new methods of voting will encourage young people with a disability to vote. Some of those methods may be more attractive to young people with a disability. We are keen to work with the Electoral Commission on identifying the possible pitfalls of some of the methods that may be tried out in future and on how we can engage better with young people with a disability. We found that among young people with a disability there was a lack of awareness of the electoral process, right down to why someone would vote and what difference voting makes. If we want to achieve a more inclusive Scotland, we need to engage with young people right now.

Elaine Smith: Beyond voting, what have you done to encourage people to stand for public office?

Michelle Hegarty: We have not done anything on that issue. Through the disability agenda Scotland consortium, which brings together six disability organisations, we have tried to influence the debate on how political parties decide who should appear on their lists and who should be put forward to stand for election. We know that a working group is being set up to consider the broadening of the political process. We are keen to be involved in that.

We also want to examine how people access MSPs and councillors in constituency and ward offices. There are a number of inaccessible offices and inaccessible information is produced. We are keen to work with people on that issue. We may also be able to relate the project to young people.

Elaine Smith: I would like to ask Jackie Cairns about the video.

The Deputy Convener (Margaret Smith): We are really tight for time, so you should ask your next question instead.

Elaine Smith: We have touched on poverty issues surrounding families that are affected by disability. Douglas Hamilton from Barnardo's spoke about that during our informal session. What are the witnesses' views on the issue?

Richard Hamer: There are many issues relating to poverty, disabled people and housing. Forty per cent of households that include someone who classes themselves as disabled, long-term sick or ill live in social rented properties, compared with 30 per cent of the public as a whole. That difference is attributable in large measure to income levels. That would not be a problem, except that council properties, in particular, tend to be the least barrier free. When disabled people try to find a property that suits them, they are often told that social rented properties are the only properties that are available to them.

If the social rented sector cannot provide housing for disabled people, especially those on low incomes, we must support disabled people to find the right housing either in the private rented sector or in private ownership—we are not bothered which. Many of the problems that disabled people have in obtaining a mortgage and financial products are to do with the fact that they are seen to be low-income households and are therefore directly excluded by mortgage lenders, banks and building societies.

The Convener (Cathy Peattie): There is time for three more questions. I ask for questions and answers to be kept short.

Mrs Nanette Milne (North East Scotland) (Con): The issue that I want to raise has been touched on by several members of the panel. In its draft budget this year, the Scottish Executive set out its intention to focus resources on

> "following up European Year of Disabled People 2003 and continuing to work with disability organisations to promote the rights and participation of disabled people in society".

In the coming years, how can the rights and participation of disabled people best be promoted at the Scottish level?

Heather Middleton: That is a difficult question. Perhaps Jackie Cairns can help me out.

Jackie Cairns: I would like more disabled people to put themselves forward for campaigning. I know that we all do more than our fair share at times. We end up leading the way and being ambassadors in our various disabilities. We try to work extremely hard—sometimes harder than our able-bodied colleagues, just to be on a par with them. I know that that happens all too often. I like the expression "in your face". We need to be active in promoting disability issues with the Scottish Executive. We should have people standing as candidates and really getting in there. Not that I am offering, mind.

The Convener: I do not know—I think that you might be a good candidate.

12:15

Shiona Baird (North East Scotland) (Green): What can be done to help disabled people to build confidence to go into the workplace? What can be done with employers and businesses?

Michelle Hegarty: Enterprise is the devolved issue there, but there was no focus on disabled people in the enterprise strategy, so last week's conference was heartening. Scottish Enterprise has certainly focused on the issue and work will have to be developed in the coming year. Scottish Enterprise can do a lot to encourage diversity in the workplace—perhaps offering incentives to companies, indigenous or from abroad, that have strong equal opportunities policies. Scottish Enterprise can also support people who become disabled later in life and need rehabilitation so that they can retain their jobs. By next year, more than 40 per cent of the population will be over 45. That is the age at which the incidence of disability starts to increase, so more and more of the work force will require such support. The enterprise strategy should tackle that issue now.

A lot of good work has been done to educate employers about taking a disabled person into the workplace. The issue is a difficult one. A lot of programmes focus on training individuals and giving them skills, but employers must recognise that a disabled person can do the job and they must get away from the myth that disabled people might be off work more frequently. An education campaign is required. The Disability Rights Commission is working on that, but the Scottish Executive will also have a role. The Executive should consider how to support such work.

Marilyn Livingstone (Kirkcaldy) (Lab): Just before I ask my question, I should say to the witnesses that I am the disability reporter on the Equal Opportunities Committee. Michelle Hegarty has spoken about consultative forums and umbrella organisations; that is work in which I could get involved because of the way in which this committee works. Anyone here who wishes to contact me should do so, or have a chat with me after the meeting. We might be able to do some work together.

There have been many good projects, but we are concerned about sustainability and ensuring that barriers to access continue to be removed. I am not sure whether the witnesses know, but the committee wishes to launch an inquiry into disability issues in this parliamentary session. As I said, people can speak to me later if they wish, but what issues should we consider in our inquiry?

Richard Hamer: Obviously, I will say housing. A major crisis faces local authorities and disabled people in the provision of housing. We are not talking simply about people who are physically disabled. We are also talking about a large number of young people who may have a learning disability or a mental health problem, who live with their families and are almost hidden in the statistics. There is a massive problem, but a good body of reports exists. Those reports could be the basis for further work.

I am sorry—would you remind me of the first part of your question?

Marilyn Livingstone: How do we ensure that the really good, successful projects that have been undertaken are sustainable?

Richard Hamer: Our application for funding was based on the idea that we could continue the work. The information and training that we are providing will be a rolling programme from now on. We have the ability and resources to continue using and developing the information that we have created. For us, the issue was very much about putting in the foundations and building on the work, which we can then develop at less cost later.

Jackie Cairns: The disability strategy group and other projects were on-going before I came to Fife College—I feel like I was built in with the bricks—and before the video project came about. The college is committed to continuing that work after the video launch and to ensuring that anybody with a disability is welcome to come to the college. We want to push that message to colleges across Scotland and beyond, as well as to the people who are invited to the launch.

Education is important. There are some extremely talented and clever disabled people from all walks of life who do not, for one reason or another, get the opportunity to demonstrate their abilities, qualities, intelligence and integrity—often, they are not given a chance, because they are perceived as disabled. The same thing occurs when they enter the workplace.

Education has to start at grass-roots level in schools. I went to a school that was just for blind people and, although disabled people are much more integrated in schools now, there are still people who go to special schools. There need to be links between the schools that people with disabilities go to and further and higher education. Links should be made from the beginning to the end of education. As I said, education is lifelong and links have to go from the bottom right the way up. People have got to talk to one another and give everyone the chance to show what they can do.

Michelle Hegarty: The inquiry should focus on families with a disabled child, which has been a particular focus for us this year and will be next year. That echoes a lot of what you heard from Barnardo's at the start of the year.

The key issues are to do with poverty. In particular, for a lot of families, the choice whether to go to work is made for them. In trying to eradicate child poverty, we need to focus on families with a disabled child, because they are likely to incur a lot of extra costs as a result of the disability. We need to look at after-school and out-of-school care—that is a huge issue with which many parents are struggling because of the way in which the system is set up. A lot of good work could be done around that to strengthen the options for families with a disabled child in getting appropriate after-school and out-of-school care.

Another huge issue is benefits. Of relevance to the Scottish Parliament is a benefits take-up campaign, because a lot of families do not know to which benefits they are entitled. In particular, they do not know the benefits that they are entitled to when their child moves from 16 to being an adult. A lot of families miss out on those benefits.

A huge issue for many families is advice and information from the point of diagnosis. Diagnosis can take anything up to three, four or five years. Families struggle to find information on services, support, benefits and employment options. That huge gap needs to be addressed.

The final issue is about having a childhood. Many young people are denied access to leisure facilities, council-run schemes, holiday schemes and even things such as youth clubs and scouts—all the things that most children take for granted. Part of the issue relates to the skills and training that are needed by the staff who run those schemes and part of it is about accessibility and where the schemes are held. We need to ensure that people have the confidence to make the schemes more inclusive to young people with a disability. For us, all those matters relate to the broad issue of families with a disabled child.

The Convener: I thank the witnesses for their evidence. We will take a two-minute break to allow for a change of witnesses.

12:24

Meeting suspended.

12:30

On resuming—

The Convener: Before I reconvene the meeting with the second set of witnesses, I must tell the committee that Margaret Smith has had to go back to Edinburgh for another meeting.

I warmly welcome to the meeting Drena O'Malley from Deafblind Scotland; Marie Burns from the Glasgow Association for Mental Health; and Jim MacLeod from the Inverclyde Council on Disability. The format of this session will be the same as that of the previous one, with committee members asking various questions. If you all want to answer a particular question, you should feel free to do so.

Will you indicate the various projects that your organisations have been involved in as part of the European year of disabled people? Was it a good approach and has it made any difference to the people in your organisations?

Marie Burns (Glasgow Association for Mental Health): The Glasgow Association for Mental Health received money from the European year of disabled people for coaching training for volunteer staff. For many years, volunteer staff said that they wanted computer training. Many of them did not have a computer at home, had not received any computer training at school and wanted access to a computer because it was part of their job. After all, we now have to answer e-mail inquiries and maintain on-line information sources.

That approach has been very successful. In fact, the training is being carried out today. I told volunteers that I was giving evidence today and asked them to suggest some examples that I could give to the committee. One volunteer who had never been to the library to use the internet told me that he is now going three times a week and that it has opened up a whole new world to him.

We also received money to produce leaflets in more accessible formats, which we are doing, and for other training. Moreover, because the training has been so successful, we have also used EYDP money as match funding to apply to Lloyds TSB for money to carry out more coaching. We are awaiting the outcome of that application, which is expected on 4 December.

Jim MacLeod (Inverclyde Council on Disability): Inverclyde Council on Disability has been going for 16 years now and has more than 400 members in the area. We offer a number of services including advocacy, shopmobility and information services; we campaign on awareness; and we network with statutory and non-statutory bodies and the voluntary sector in Inverclyde and beyond.

Earlier this year, we applied for an EYDP grant to set up a website not simply for the council on disability but to network with other organisations within the voluntary sector in Inverclyde. Because of some staffing problems—we have been down a manager for seven months now and have only recently appointed a new one—we have experienced a few delays. We have had a couple of meetings and discussions about the website; the web design is currently out to tender and we will appoint someone after 19 December. After that, it will be full steam ahead. We hope that the web design will be up and ready by February and that it will be launched in March. I know that, technically, the launch is outwith the European year of disabled people but, as many people have pointed out this morning, this is not just about one year: it is about continuing these projects year on year.

The Convener: Some things just take time.

Drena O'Malley (Deafblind Scotland): As I am sure most of you are aware, deafblindness is a low-incidence disability, so Deafblind Scotland and its members share the difficulties that are experienced by other low-incidence disabilities. I hope to say something about that later. We received EYDP money to help deafblind people to become a resource in the community.

Our organisation has nine directors, seven of whom are deafblind. We very much want to encourage deafblind people to speak for themselves, so only on occasions such as this would I speak on their behalf. I am nervous enough about speaking here, so I do not know how any of them would have felt about doing so. However, it seemed a good idea that we should have someone following what happens today. If the committee needs a deafblind person in the future, Robert Dillon, who is here today, will be an expert witness.

The money was given to allow us to do things such as we are doing today. It was to provide communication support so that deafblind people could represent themselves in national, local and specialist organisations. That could involve deafblind people serving on a kirk session, representing themselves in Deafblind Scotland, local societies for the blind or disability organisations, or becoming an MSP. That involves training the deafblind person and encouraging people on committees to accept deafblind people. That is not always easy.

We have been grateful to receive the money, as it has made quite a big difference.

Marlyn Glen: One aim of the year was to raise public awareness. How successful has that been? How do you plan to give feedback on your individual projects? Obviously, giving evidence to the committee today is part of that, but have you any other plans to feed that back to the Scottish Executive and the DTI?

Drena O'Malley: Part of our remit was to develop a model of good practice for involving deafblind people in consultation. That has been a major success. Deafblind people have developed a set of guidelines that will allow them to take part in meetings and consultation processes. That is an achievement that we will feed back, together with other information on how we have carried out the project.

The year has helped a little bit with public awareness, but it has been nothing like what might have been possible. Obviously, that has to be addressed in some way. However, given what could be achieved in a year, I think that the initiative has done quite well.

Marie Burns: The year has raised awareness within our organisation, but public awareness has not been raised as much as it could have been. We are always aware of the bad publicity and stigma that surround mental health, but service users have often worked through the "see me" campaign, which they have found very useful, and *The Big Issue in Scotland* had good articles on mental health. Certainly, people can be reluctant to come forward because of past experiences. During the evaluation, I said that we should consider linking up with the "see me" campaign to try to publicise the issue better.

Jim MacLeod: In Inverclyde, we have never been slow in coming forward. We raised a number of issues, as we have done over many years, to do with housing, education, employment, training, transport—the lot. We have regular meetings with statutory bodies and take part in consultations. We have a fairly good rapport with the local press in Inverclyde. We issued a press release earlier this year about the moneys that were given to us. When we have the launch, we will invite the Scottish Executive to send someone along on the day. We will also go through our normal contacts with the media to let people know that the website is up and running and that there is a handbook to accompany it. We will ensure that awareness is raised and that people know that we have the website up and going.

Mrs Milne: As you know, the Scottish Executive's draft budget this year indicates its intention to follow up the European year of disabled people and to continue to work with disability organisations to promote the rights and participation of disabled people in society. How do you think that the rights and participation of disabled people can best be promoted in Scotland in the next year or two?

Drena O'Malley: It is all about participation. I am a great fan of the Scottish Parliament. Cathie Craigie has been a godsend for deafblind people. She has taken a real interest in deaf people, blind people and deafblind people in particular, which has been a huge encouragement to me. It is much easier to access politicians than it was before. Having said that, we want real participation, which is much more difficult to achieve. A couple of weeks ago, I tried to take a deafblind person to a meeting held by the joint future sensory impairment strategy and implementation subgroup. I leave members to think how communicators are trying to communicate today; they would have to finger spell the name of that group. Sighted hearing people graze—I use that word advisedly—on information all day long, on the internet, on the radio and everywhere. Many people are cut off from that in many ways and we have to address that fact. If we do not start talking in simple terms and thinking simply about giving people real access, we are in effect cutting them off and stopping their participation.

Marie Burns: I want to comment on access to volunteering. I know that Marion Findlay from the volunteer centre said that there was a lower incidence of disabled people in volunteering. Extra support resources should be in place. A wheelchair user has applied to be a volunteer with us. We have ramped access and accessible toilets, but she might need taxis, because she can get dial-a-bus to take her to us only on certain days, which might not fit in with her volunteering opportunity. How can organisations such as ours provide taxi costs, if they are necessary so that people can be included?

Jim MacLeod: I welcome the news that the Scottish Executive is going to engage more with disabled people. That is long overdue in society generally. It is all about raising awareness and changing attitudes, to which education is fundamental. We have to break down barriers and I would love to see more inclusive education for people with disabilities. We should consider not just physical barriers but access in its wider sense. I have heard people talking about housing and various other things that are interrelated. There is no point in having good accessible housing if people cannot get to the shops or a workplace or if transport is inaccessible. All those things go hand in glove and they have to match up.

Elaine Smith: Capability Scotland talks in its submission about its recent report, “Nobody Ever Wants To Play With Me”, which highlights how poverty, disability and our culture combine to limit the life chances of disabled children and young people. Previous witnesses to the Equal Opportunities Committee have also touched on the issue of poverty in families affected by disability. What is your view on that?

Jim MacLeod: You are right about the poverty issue. All sorts of research has shown that there are higher rates of poverty among people who are disadvantaged, particularly those with disabilities. We have carried out survey work in Inverclyde in social inclusion partnership areas over the past few years. Indeed, we are conducting our final piece of research in the final SIP area in Inverclyde at the moment. The questions are based on a range of subjects and issues, but some of the statistics that have been thrown up within the field of employment opportunities are far worse than national figures on job opportunities for people with disabilities. So yes, poverty is a real issue.

We have to engage better with all young people and not just those with disabilities. There is still a lot of work to do and a lot of issues to tackle.

12:45

The Convener: Do any other panel members want to comment on the question?

Drena O’Malley: Financial poverty is important and should never be disregarded because the costs of being disabled are huge. If someone is dual-sensory impaired, everything that they want to do is more expensive. They cannot go anywhere without assistance; it costs to go to the local shops. However, there is also poverty of information in Scotland about many of the good things that everybody is doing. We have to address that throughout society, but particularly for disabled, disadvantaged, and disfranchised groups. We have to get the information to them and we have to think of innovative ways of doing that because they are not getting that information at the moment and that is excluding them.

Marie Burns: Access to benefits and benefits advice is an issue that comes up consistently in mental health.

Frances Curran (West of Scotland) (SSP): You have touched on this issue already, as did the previous panel. Much of the activity of the EYDP concerned communication and integration. In your experience of the year, has that been progressed? What more could be done? Have organisations that have been involved in the year worked together more on projects?

Jim MacLeod: As I said earlier, Inverclyde Council on Disability networks with more than 20 organisations in Inverclyde and beyond. We meet council and health board officials. In the past, we have been involved in joint community care plans. We already do a lot of networking, but there might be parts of Scotland where that networking does not happen or where it could be improved.

Integration is a big and fundamental issue because it all boils down to education. I would love there to be more inclusive education because that could go a long way to breaking down barriers.

Marie Burns: We work with other organisations, but this year has given us a chance to do that in more depth and detail. For example, we worked with the making connections unit at Glasgow Caledonian University, which works on web accessibility, and we also worked with the Scottish accessible information forum. We are also more aware of what AbilityNet does.

Drena O’Malley: As a low-incidence disability organisation, we have to spend a lot of time talking to other organisations and trying to make sure that we are on the agendas of the bigger groups. That is par for the course for people with sensory impairment. We are on the cross-party groups in the Scottish Parliament on deafness and blindness. We probably do a lot less with generic disability groups than we should do, but we do not have the resources to network everywhere. It is just a long, slow haul to put deafblindness on as many agendas as possible.

Jim MacLeod: I have one thing to add to my answer to Frances Curran’s question. There is one area that is sadly lacking, although it is improving. Sometimes consultation is done at the tail-end of things, but every consultation must be genuine and not tagged on. It should start from the beginning. It all boils down to finance; there is no point in putting something in place late and then having to readdress it. It is better to put a consultation in place before anything starts.

The Convener: That is a good point.

Shiona Baird: What more can be done to help disabled people to build the confidence that they need to go into the workplace? What work do you think could be done with employers and businesses? Sorry, Jim, perhaps we should not always start with you.

Jim MacLeod: That is okay. As I said, we have done a fair bit of research in Inverclyde and I am quite shocked at the number of people who have a disability who are not in employment and have not been given any sort of employment opportunity. A lot more must be done.

Towards the end of the second world war, legislation was put in place—most of which was repealed a few years ago—on the 3 per cent quota. Nobody really adhered to that quota in Scotland at the time, with the exception perhaps of one or two local authorities. To be honest, government was one of the biggest sinners on employment matters.

I am sorry to harp on about this, but the issue is education. When we segregate children we create attitude problems and a lack of awareness among people who do not have disabilities. When people grow up and become architects, joiners, lawyers or whatever, barriers have to be broken down that should have been broken down when people were much younger. We could do that in one generation, but we have to start now, in a big way.

Marie Burns: Service users tell us that benefits are the big problem in relation to access to work—I think that that has been mentioned. The benefits system does not have the flexibility that is needed to enable people to try working, for example, for four hours a week. There is also a lack of training; we have brought people in through the new deal for young people, which was a good package that included training, but there is no similar package for disabled people.

Quite a lot of people come to us who are interested in working, but they are faced with the choice either of staying on benefits or of going into full-time work. They might manage to stay in full-time work for a number of months, but then perhaps their health fails and they have to go back on benefits. There should be flexibility—people have been saying for years that that should be considered.

Drena O'Malley: We have two deafblind employees. It was a nightmare getting everything in place for the first one—with the disability employment adviser and so on, but the second time everything fell into place.

It is about having role models all over the place and making it easy for people to work. I echo what Marie Burns said: it is important that people should be able to try something, then try to do a bit more and then step back, if necessary, without feeling that they have failed.

Marilyn Livingstone: I will put the same question to Drena O'Malley that I put to the previous panel of witnesses. One of the objectives of the European year of disabled people was to raise awareness of the multiple discrimination that disabled people face. Has that been achieved?

Drena O'Malley: A terrific amount of good work has taken place this year and we can all take pride in that. There has been less success in raising awareness than there might have been, perhaps because we have been so busy trying to achieve all the worthy objectives that were set out.

People are not aware that deafblind people in Scotland are discriminated against because they are not protected by legislation that is in force in England and Wales. One of the few bad points about the Scottish Parliament is that it missed out on the guidance that was introduced in England and Wales under section 7 of the Local Authority Social Services Act 1970, which gave deafblind people in England and Wales the right to be assessed and identified as deafblind and to receive one-to-one communication support. The timing of the introduction of the section 7 guidance, after the Scottish Parliament came into being, could not have been worse for deafblind people in Scotland, who do not have those rights. It has not been possible for us to achieve the same level of support for deafblind people in Scotland, despite networking, writing and being suitably compliant with people. That is an example of discrimination that has happened by accident, so how much more discrimination is out there that makes disabled people think, "Goodness, why can't I have that?"? We need to sort that out as much as we can.

Marilyn Livingstone: Thank you for that. We have heard about examples of good practice. I asked the previous panel about good practice and sustainability. What are your views on that? The committee is to carry out an inquiry into disability issues later in the session; what issues should we consider as part of the inquiry?

Marie Burns: First, I will address the question of sustainability. As I said earlier, we have made an application to Lloyds TSB for funding to retain our volunteer coaching. If we are successful in that application, the coaching will continue next year. It is certainly the case that evaluation and the money that we got from EYDP was the way forward in that application.

I spoke earlier about volunteers with disabilities. The committee might like to look at how they can be helped and allowed to participate in volunteer opportunities.

Drena O'Malley: Our project is all about sustainability. If it is possible to create a resource among deafblind people, they are the people who are best placed to take everything forward. The disability world has to help deafblind people to do things for themselves in whatever way they choose to do them. That is the way to make things sustainable. We will move on to other jobs, but disabled people will not move on unless there is some great change.

I answered the question about the committee inquiry in my response to an earlier question. The committee should look at the differences in service delivery—the postcode lottery in national health service treatment and community care services. It is bad for someone to know that their friend in Aberdeenshire is receiving some sort of service that they cannot access. The postcode lottery can range from getting a better prescription in one area to section 7 guidance applying in England but not in Scotland. We have to look at how we can be transparently fair to people.

Jim MacLeod: One of the things that the committee should look at next year is the way in which it is possible to build up the confidence of disabled people so that they can move forward and open up opportunities. We heard earlier about information. The inquiry should look into how people can access information in its various formats and so on.

On the sustainability question, I would like to see the committee taking the pressure off organisations such as ours. We are constantly seeking funding. Because we spend so much time seeking funding, we can sometimes lose track of what we are supposed to be about. That is a big issue not only for my own organisation but for others across the voluntary sector in Scotland. Too much time is spent looking for funding and for ways in which to keep our heads above the water.

We need more networking, particularly with user-led organisations such as Inclusion Scotland, which is a new organisation that has been going only for a year or two. It is represented at the committee today.

The Convener: I thank the witnesses for their evidence, which was very helpful. I thank all of the folk who have taken the time to come along to the committee this morning to tell us what they think we should do. I hope that they will join us for lunch, as that will give us an opportunity to continue the conversation. As I said earlier, everything this morning has been recorded. It will be fed into the committee's inquiry.

Meeting closed at 12:58.

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