

# **EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE**

Tuesday 10 February 2004  
*(Morning)*

Session 2

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## **EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE** **3<sup>rd</sup> Meeting 2004, 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:**

Kemi Adebayo (Multi Ethnic Aberdeen Ltd)  
Lorna Ahlquist (50/50 Campaign)  
David Bernard (Scottish Youth Parliament)  
Niall Hermiston (Scottish Civic Forum)  
Live Johnsrud (Scottish Civic Forum)  
Steven Kidd (Scottish Youth Parliament)  
Fran Loots (Engender Ltd)  
Rami Ousta (Black and Ethnic Minority Infrastructure in Scotland Ltd)  
Sue Robertson (Engender Ltd)  
Ron Skinner MBE (Scottish Disability Equality Forum)  
Jeanette Timmins (Engender Ltd)

### **CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE**

Steve Farrell

### **SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK**

Ruth Cooper

### **ASSISTANT CLERK**

Roy McMahon

### **LOCATION**

Committee Room 1



## Scottish Parliament

### Equal Opportunities Committee

Tuesday 10 February 2004

(Morning)

[THE CONVENER opened the meeting at 10:08]

### Local Governance (Scotland) Bill: Stage 1

**The Convener (Cathy Peattie):** Good morning and welcome to the Equal Opportunities Committee's third meeting of 2004. We have received apologies from Margaret Smith, Marilyn Livingstone and Frances Curran.

This morning, we will take evidence on the Local Governance (Scotland) Bill. Our first witnesses are Niall Hermiston and Live Johnsrud from the Scottish Civic Forum and Steven Kidd and David Bernard from the Scottish Youth Parliament. I give you all a very warm welcome. We will ask you questions and we want to give you the opportunity to convey as much information as possible to us, so please relax.

Will the bill's provisions on proportional representation and electoral wards have a positive impact on widening representation in local government? Obviously, your organisations might have different views, so all should feel free to answer.

**Niall Hermiston (Scottish Civic Forum):** I will introduce the organisation that I represent and its remit. The Scottish Civic Forum seeks to help organisations and individuals to engage in democratic processes. Our work includes acting as a neutral convener in discussions on Government policy. The organisation avoids taking positions on specific issues, such as proportional representation, to maintain its neutrality. However, we gathered opinion on local government reform during 2001 and 2002. We held two events to discuss the white paper "Renewing Local Democracy: The Next Steps" and an event on changing the faces of our councils. The comments that I will make today are based on the responses that we received from civic groups and individuals who attended those events, which were held in Aberdeen, Oban and Stirling.

On balance, the groups that we talked to are in favour of the introduction of proportional representation. We heard that councils must be more representative of the communities that they serve and that PR might help to bring that about.

However, the positive comments that we gathered were accompanied by concerns about PR being seen as a one-stop solution to the problem of representation of the wider community. In the course of many consultations on different themes, the Scottish Civic Forum has encountered concerning levels of disengagement and disillusionment with Government processes and political systems. Unsurprisingly, the less well-represented groups in society appear to be the most disillusioned.

People report that they do not know what their local council is responsible for or what the role of councillor involves; furthermore, they do not know where to go to get that information. The introduction of PR for local government could be accompanied by a programme of education, for younger people and older people alike, which might help to attract candidates from under-represented groups. The programme could also be used to brief successful candidates, which is something else—

**The Convener:** May I interrupt you? Because we want to pursue a particular line of questioning, it is less than helpful for you to go through the outcome of your discussions. It would be helpful if you could apply yourself to the question. I know that the issue is wide and tempting, but my colleagues will ask you questions on particular issues later, so perhaps you can return to your comments then.

My question was about whether the change will have a positive impact on widening representation in local government. You said a little about that, but do you think that it will have a positive impact in general?

**Niall Hermiston:** Yes. On balance, from the material that I have gone through so far, people are in favour of the change and they see it as a positive move to increase participation.

**The Convener:** Thank you. Would the witnesses from the Scottish Youth Parliament like to respond?

**Steven Kidd (Scottish Youth Parliament):** Good morning, first of all.

**The Convener:** Good morning.

**Steven Kidd:** I will make some comments in a similar vein, although I do not want to take forever. The Scottish Youth Parliament, for those members who are unaware of it, is an apolitical organisation, although it seeks to change the policies of Government and other decision makers. One of its other aims is to widen participation among young people, along the lines of the active citizenship agenda, which is one of the Government's buzzwords of the moment.

We took part in a year-long consultation that culminated in 2003 with the production of a

document called "Getting the Message Right", which we termed a youth manifesto. In that manifesto, alongside a wide range of other issues, is our belief that PR should be introduced for local government elections. We believe that all those over the age of 16 should be entitled to vote and that younger people should be encouraged to stand for election to address the participation issue. We would like as much action as possible to be taken to bridge the gap and allow that to happen.

**Mrs Nanette Milne (North East Scotland)**

**(Con):** My first question is to the witnesses from the Scottish Civic Forum. In your written submission, you say that the participants at the Aberdeen meeting thought that an advantage of STV is

"the ability to choose between candidates of the same party".

Do you have any views on how that might work in practice and how it might impact on the diversity of councillors?

10:15

**Niall Hermiston:** From the reports that we received, we think that one advantage of a PR system is that it could inspire political parties to field more candidates in each ward. Given local levels of party membership, that could widen out opportunities for election to a greater cross-section of the community. We did not receive much comment on this area, but there was a feeling that first-past-the-post systems favour political parties and that a PR system would open up the system to more independent candidates.

**Mrs Milne:** Does the Scottish Youth Parliament have a comment on that?

**Steven Kidd:** I echo what was said by the Scottish Civic Forum about the current system favouring political parties. As I am sure you are aware, young people are known for their strong beliefs on single issues. They have a real disinterest in the system of party politics, in which it often seems as though people argue for the sake of argument. Evidence from the Scottish Parliament, particularly the growth of the smaller parties—although they are still parties—and the fact that independents sit in the nationally elected Parliament, makes young people feel that they have more of an option to participate in the process. Were we to see such representation at a lower level, that could only be of benefit to all people in the community, and to young people in particular.

**Mrs Milne:** So you think that proportional representation might lead to more young people coming forward.

**Steven Kidd:** I think so, but that is not the reason why we want a PR system to be

introduced. We want, in particular, the voting age to be lowered to 16, because it is discriminatory not to allow 16-year-olds to vote. A secondary impact is that the system would address concerns about democratic deficit and voter apathy.

**Mrs Milne:** Does the Scottish Civic Forum have any comments on lowering the voting age from 18 to 16?

**Niall Hermiston:** I do not think that we do. We have received no comments from any groups in our consultation to report back on that matter.

**Mrs Milne:** I return to the Scottish Youth Parliament witnesses. What feedback have you had from the people whom you have consulted? Is the consensus that they would like the voting age to be lowered? I have been involved with different groups, and there has been a fairly mixed response from young people on whether they want the voting age to be reduced from 18 to 16.

**David Bernard (Scottish Youth Parliament):** There has been a mixed response. Lowering the voting age from 18 to 16 is one of our founding principles. When the Parliament has voted on that, it has supported lowering the voting age. I am sure that you have heard all the arguments for lowering the voting age. Youth Parliament members firmly believe in those arguments. They do not believe that there should be taxation without representation. Votes on that issue were positive, thus lowering the voting age was included in our manifesto "Getting the Message Right", as Steven Kidd said.

As is the case in the Scottish Parliament, we have to assume that our members represent the views of their constituents and the organisations that they represent, so we have to take it that lowering the voting age is the will of the majority of young people in Scotland.

**The Convener:** Shiona Baird has a small question.

**Shiona Baird (North East Scotland) (Green):** I hope that it is not too loaded. You have all indicated that you wish to widen representation and diversity on councils, so if the form of PR that is chosen does not do that, I assume that you will not be happy.

**Live Johnsrud (Scottish Civic Forum):** Of course not. The Scottish Civic Forum's view, and the view of the forum on discrimination, which I am working on, is that to introduce another voting system or form of PR alone is not enough. A lot of work has to be done to change attitudes among the general public, perhaps especially among younger people and other under-represented groups, such as ethnic minorities, disabled people and people from different backgrounds. A PR system would probably enhance diversity within

councils, but it will not be enough on its own. We cannot expect that things will change overnight, just like that. Substantial groundwork needs to be done to educate people and to create a healthy curiosity and a natural interest in politics, and local government in particular, so that people will start to consider standing for election. That interest needs to be nurtured carefully and specifically.

The main point from the Scottish Civic Forum is that we need to be prepared to engage properly with all the different under-represented groups, on their terms. It is not enough just to post out a wee leaflet written in different community languages or to make a brand new, cool-looking leaflet for young people. We have to go out there and talk to people to make them feel that Government officials and politicians in Scotland have a genuine interest in engaging with them. We need to be prepared to pay for the cost of that. It is not just about arranging another meeting, or one meeting in each of the 32 local authorities. We have to do a range of different work and we have to take into account interpretation, signers for deaf people, crèche facilities and travel costs. The things that can make it difficult for people to participate have to be addressed both in consultation and when it comes to getting people on board.

I do not know whether that was a clear answer to your question.

**Shiona Baird:** Yes. It was excellent.

**Live Johnsrud:** We cannot just think about PR as the only way forward; we have to widen the scope and admit that the issue is much bigger.

**Mrs Milne:** I want to go back a little. I jumped on what you said about your campaign for votes at age 16. The bill contains proposals to lower the age qualification for council candidates from 21 to 18. Is that measure likely to have an impact on young people standing for election to councils?

**David Bernard:** I will answer both Shiona Baird and Nanette Milne's questions. In our manifesto, alongside our commitments to PR in local government and to lowering the voting age, we spoke about citizenship education in schools, which would allow young people to take part in the electoral procedure with knowledge of the political process and the political parties. The two questions go hand in hand. The Scottish Parliament has succeeded in being more approachable for people, including young people, and I hope that it will continue to do so. In order for us to introduce voting for young people, they need to be educated about politics as part of the school curriculum. That would allow for further engagement of young people and would allow them to stand for election at 18.

**Steven Kidd:** One of our partner organisations, YouthLink Scotland, recently published the results

of a survey called "Being Young in Scotland", in which it consulted a number of young people throughout the country. One of the things that I found interesting, but not terribly surprising, was that voting is not seen among young people as a particularly important way to affect one's life. Young people thought that volunteering was more important in that regard, because with volunteering they could see an immediate and definite benefit to their community; with voting, it takes some time for parties to follow up—if they ever do so—what they said prior to the election.

The issue is immediacy—people being able to see that they have changed something by using their vote. As David Bernard mentioned, too often the only students of the way in which the political process works—not just on paper, but in reality—are those who voluntarily take courses in modern studies or similar subjects. This is a cross-curricular issue—it is about learning how to be a citizen of your country. We are talking not about active citizenship, but about things that are demanded of an ordinary citizen and which an ordinary citizen can demand of others.

**The Convener:** I feel very strongly that the Labour Party's support for 50:50 representation has meant that we have managed to have more women in the Scottish Parliament. Other parties have done the same thing in different ways. That has made a considerable impact on the work of the Parliament. Do you think that, if more young people were engaged in local government and the Scottish Parliament, that would have an impact on policy and the way in which government works?

**Steven Kidd:** There would be a noticeable difference. It is important that people are able to start political activity at a younger age. I understand that there is a necessary process—in political parties, people do not start at the top. It takes people time to get near the top and to have significant influence even in the party to which they belong. Any move to allow people to start the process earlier will mean that there are younger candidates. This country has a significant youth population, but there are no members of the Scottish Parliament under 25. I understand why that is the case. I do not agree with it, but we must examine realistic ways of ensuring that people are given the opportunity to participate. I am not saying that we will suddenly end up with a chamber half full of young people.

**Niall Hermiston:** The Scottish Civic Forum recognises education for citizenship as a key component of efforts to increase engagement, to reach out to different groups and to get people involved in political processes. There is also a lifelong learning need.

**Elaine Smith (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab):** As the committee reporter on gender, I want to ask specifically about women's

representation. I declare an interest as a member of the Transport and General Workers Union. Respondents to the Executive's consultation on the draft bill, such as the TGWU, have suggested that there should be two-member wards and a requirement for one female and one male to be elected in each. In considering the question of gender balance, do you support the proposition that the representatives who are elected in a multimember ward should be gender balanced? For example, the rules might state that at least one woman should be elected in a three-member ward and at least two women should be elected in a four-member ward. Do you have a view on that issue?

**Niall Hermiston:** This is one issue on which I cannot express an opinion on behalf of the Scottish Civic Forum. The forum is very supportive of 50:50 campaigns and of equal representation for all under-represented groups in society. However, there is not an organisational position on the mechanisms for achieving that.

**Elaine Smith:** When it comes to party politics, should the issue be left to the parties? I am not sure how the rules would apply to independent members.

10:30

**Niall Hermiston:** If in the future we engage with the issue and examine which mechanisms would work best, we will examine their effectiveness in terms of governance.

**Steven Kidd:** The Scottish Youth Parliament has not discussed this topic specifically, although, like the Scottish Civic Forum, we can say that we are committed to equality. A number of general concerns have been expressed. The Parliament has not made a clear statement about what are seen as positive discrimination measures. It is not clear whether it supports those measures or whether it believes that other measures should be taken to ensure that everyone has equality of opportunity—that there is equality from the beginning and that set standards do not need to be put in place.

**David Bernard:** Certainly, when my Scottish Youth Parliament committee—the equal opportunities committee—spoke about the issue, we were not in favour of positive discrimination in the form that has been described, because we believe that it would undermine the democratic process. Candidates should be elected for their ability rather than because of their gender. The Scottish Youth Parliament and its equal opportunities committee have never expressed support for positive discrimination.

**Elaine Smith:** Part of the problem with that view arises from the split between ability and the

position of men and women in society. However, that leads me nicely to my next point.

Only 22 per cent of councillors in Scotland are female, and I do not believe that that is because women are not as able as men. I suggest to the panel that action must be taken about that situation. A stick approach would involve putting into place mechanisms that would not be positive discrimination—which would be illegal—but which would be positive action initiatives, such as the Scottish Labour Party's twinning process prior to the first Scottish Parliament elections.

A carrot approach would involve providing greater remuneration for councillors. Lack of adequate remuneration is perhaps one of the barriers that result in only 22 per cent of councillors being female. The bill proposes a new remuneration system for councillors, which would be supplemented by a limited number of payments to reflect additional responsibilities. Currently, there is only a small allowances scheme, in which allowances increase according to councillors' increasing responsibilities. The proposed new remuneration system would introduce a pension scheme and a severance arrangement for councillors, and would establish an independent committee to advise on remuneration packages. One of my colleagues will probably deal with that issue later.

We seem to be moving towards treating being a councillor as having a job. The Executive said, in the policy memorandum that accompanies the bill:

"many councillors are finding it increasingly difficult to combine their role as a councillor with other activities, such as employment, childcare or caring responsibilities".

Will the bill's remuneration and pension proposals, which represent more of a carrot approach, be likely to encourage a more diverse group of people, including young people, to stand for election to local authorities by making it easier for people to juggle other activities with being a councillor?

**Niall Hermiston:** In my recollection, remuneration was not a priority for the groups that we talked to during the three meetings that we held. I do not think that people regarded better remuneration as the carrot that would bring them in, although mention was made of widening access by having provisions such as care costs. To enable people to get involved, aspects such as travel and care costs must be considered, particularly for rural areas, in which people can travel long distances to attend meetings.

We heard suggestions that people who work for smaller organisations are less likely to receive paid time off work. Obviously, if someone is on a low income, paid time off work is an important factor, and not being able to get paid time off work



deters people from lower income backgrounds from getting involved in councils; it is possible that it also puts people off working in the voluntary sector, where their skills are greatly missed.

**David Bernard:** On Elaine Smith's question and the point about positive action, what is important is removing the barriers that prevent women from standing in local elections. I concur with the Scottish Civic Forum's view that we should consider aspects such as child care. Rather than putting systems in place in political parties or legislating to promote the selection of female candidates, the Scottish Parliament and society must tackle the barriers that prevent women from engaging in politics in general.

**Elaine Smith:** My opinion would be that we need all of that, but we are not here to listen to my opinion; we are here to listen to what you have to say about the bill. On child care arrangements, are you thinking along the lines of having vouchers to assist with everyday child care but complementing that with crèches, for example, for particular meetings? Should all local authorities consider such provision?

**David Bernard:** Any measure that can be put in place to ensure that women with children are able to engage in politics should be explored and provided if possible. We need to remove barriers that are preventing not only women but all sections of society from becoming involved in politics. If there is funding—which is always the big issue—appropriate measures should be implemented.

**Steven Kidd:** As an addendum, I point out that more than 50 per cent of members of the Scottish Youth Parliament are women, although we have nothing in place that requires that to be the case. We have no measures or positive action policies to ensure the equal representation of any group in society, but we meet, and in most cases exceed, the proportional targets for minority groups such as minority ethnic groups, disabled people and females.

**Elaine Smith:** How do you reckon that you achieve that?

**Steven Kidd:** I have absolutely no idea, unfortunately. It has just happened that way. Perhaps it is because, as young people, we have not been influenced as much by the barriers that society puts in place as older people have. Young people choose a candidate because they think that they are the right young person, not because that person has been allowed by society to have several years of experience at that level.

**Live Johnsrud:** It is important not to fall into the trap of thinking that financial incentives alone should solve the whole problem. I do not think that someone will wish to stand for election as a

councillor simply because they will get such and such a sum of money paid to them each year. However, that will make being a councillor more possible for a lot of people and will therefore cause them to consider it.

On a purely personal note, I add that the cost of care responsibilities should be covered for everyone who needs that, regardless of whether they are a man or a woman.

**Marlyn Glen (North East Scotland) (Lab):** You might have made your position on this point clear already, but you might want to add something else. The Scottish Executive has established a councillors remuneration progress group that will examine remuneration for councillors, such as their salary, and their role and the time commitment involved. That is quite a wide remit. Given that you realise that a lot more factors than those are important, which should the group consider in order to encourage more diversity? What might be done to support the participation of young people?

**Steven Kidd:** With regard to the suggestion that the age at which people can stand for election to councils could be lowered, the problem is that a lot of young people who would become eligible would still be engaged in education and, regardless of which other measures are put in place, there is only a certain amount of time that it is possible for them to take off from university. That factor must be taken into account, but I cannot provide you with a solution.

**Marlyn Glen:** Taking that into consideration, it surprises me that you do not think that remuneration is an important factor for young people.

**Steven Kidd:** Remuneration is certainly an important factor. However, there needs to be some acknowledgement that most young people would be studying during that time. If young people were elected as councillors—and, I hope, continued to be elected as councillors—when would such involvement become a career? That is where remuneration becomes important. We must ensure that anyone who is elected at that age and cannot study during that time has something that they can fall back on.

I know that that answer went round in an awful big circle.

**Marlyn Glen:** Have you considered the fact that some councillors are part time? That said, there is an argument about the part-time status of councillors, given their responsibilities and the fact that they spend many hours working. Some are part-time councillors, while others are closer to being full-time councillors—and beyond.

**Steven Kidd:** Although we are not councillors, we have experienced situations like this one, in

which we have had to meet elected people and officials at whatever level. One of the major problems for many young people is accommodating 9-to-5 hours. The question is, how part time a part-time job becomes if someone works part time only between 9 o'clock and 5 o'clock. After all, that is when most young people study.

**Live Johnsrud:** On the general issue of remuneration, we touched earlier on how to cover care costs, travel expenses and the cost of meeting different needs, such as interpretation services, signers and disabled access. I hope that one day all those aspects will be seen not as exceptions, but as the normal state of affairs. They are as important as factors such as pay if people are to be able to stand as councillors. Moreover, the administrative support that local councils can provide is just as important, especially in rural areas. After all, we cannot really do without telephones, personal computers and so on in normal modern working life.

I cannot remember who made it, but the suggestion that people could be given a certificate or some other qualification for their service to local authorities sounds really good. I do not think that anyone would necessarily choose such an educational path, but it might give credit to and raise the status of such work. Of course, we have to take into account the fact that they would need to pass all their exams.

**Marlyn Glen:** The bill proposes the introduction of an independent Scottish local authority remuneration committee to establish the detail of the policies. Do you have any comments about that? How should such a body operate?

**Niall Hermiston:** I can provide a general answer about the Scottish Civic Forum's approach to any such groups: they need to be as widely representative as possible. I will not make a direct plug for our organisation, but we need umbrella groups that can ask grass-roots organisations for their opinions on the proposals. The Civic Forum specialises more and more in reaching less well-organised groups that, as I said earlier, have the least engagement in political process. It is crucial that, instead of finding solutions and imposing them on these people, we engage them from the start.

10:45

**Shiona Baird:** Have any of you been involved in the widening access to council membership progress group? Do you have any knowledge of it?

**Niall Hermiston:** We were sent a web link along with the papers for this meeting. However, the web link took me to a list of members and a list of future meeting dates. That was all that I found

from looking on the web, so I do not know about the group.

**Shiona Baird:** What about the witnesses from the Scottish Youth Parliament?

**David Bernard:** Our experience was exactly the same.

**Shiona Baird:** That is a statement in itself.

The purpose of the progress group is to consider "making council membership more attractive to a wider cross-section of the community"

and to

"make recommendations on the training, development and support given to councillors."

Bearing that in mind, which issues in relation to young people's representation would you recommend as requiring attention from the progress group?

**David Bernard:** Training is one of the major issues in that list. All people who are elected to positions of authority—not only young people—must be trained in certain skills, such as how to consult and represent the people. Obviously, people who stand for election as a councillor should have a certain skills base, but they must also be trained in how to work effectively and to take part in the process. That goes back to what was said earlier about citizenship education and ensuring that young people feel equipped to carry out their functions if they are elected. The Scottish Youth Parliament would emphasise the need for training, which should allow councillors to carry out their tasks and represent their constituents effectively.

**Steven Kidd:** We must also encourage the positive view among young people of engaging with the political process. Before we begin the education process, young people need to feel that engaging in the political process is worth while, that they can develop personally from it and that, through it, they can effect change and help their communities, whether locally, nationally or otherwise.

**The Convener:** It is worth noting that the progress group has a member of the Youth Parliament on it; you will need to find out what they are saying.

I am interested in barriers to participation. In written evidence, Engender mentioned that studies have identified lack of confidence and encouragement as barriers to women's political involvement. Does that apply equally to under-represented groups such as young people? Do young people lack the confidence to put their names forward and become involved in the political process? If so, how do we overcome that?

**Steven Kidd:** The short answer is yes. That barrier lies alongside that of lack of knowledge

about the process. Increasing knowledge of the system—not just, as I said, of the way in which the system works on paper—is the most important issue because that will increase confidence to a level at which young people and those from other disadvantaged groups feel that they can put themselves forward and make a difference.

**Live Johnsrud:** As I said, that might be achieved by engaging with and taking a genuine interest in the various groups. I cannot stress that enough. Field workers who engage with different groups on the groups' terms are needed. With some communities, such as certain ethnic minorities, there might be a problem because self-appointed chiefs speak on behalf of all members of the group, while people at the grass roots do not really have a voice that is heard. That applies particularly to females from ethnic minority groups, who might be more isolated because they are often not as strong in the English language and so need interpreters. It is important to get down to the bottom and really engage. I hope that funding will allow us to engage with those groups on their terms and get them together to learn from one another. It is all about increasing democratic participation.

When people have been persuaded to join a council, other matters could be examined, which could make the work more interesting for everyone. Some issues that are especially important to young people are important not just to young people. When I was a young member of a local council in Norway, I often found that when I asked questions that I thought were daft, many people who were aged 40, 50 or 60 told me later that it was really good that I asked those questions, because they did not dare to. On many issues, young people can point something out.

The times at which meetings are held should be considered and the places where meetings are held can be shifted. If we have some meetings in Glasgow, some in Edinburgh and some in other places, more people can attend. Even if they cannot go to the whole series of meetings, they can go to one or two.

The venue is another consideration. The Parliament's committee chambers is a beautiful building and committee room 1 is a beautiful room, but I mean no offence when I say that such a grand, dark, official and conservative room can put many people off daring to speak.

Those wider access issues should be considered. Then again, we cannot say enough about information and encouragement. People need to know what a local councillor can achieve and that being a councillor can be fun and does not always involve boring things and red numbers in the budget. We all have a responsibility to publicise positive stories about local government politics.

**David Bernard:** The onus is on politicians to improve the image of government. The Parliament is not considered very equal. As Steven Kidd said, we do not see young people, disabled people or even black or ethnic minority people in the chamber, and we certainly do not see people there who do not speak English as their first language. To engage people, politicians need to start considering the image of government in general—not just in local government, but in the Scottish Parliament.

**The Convener:** I hope that the bill is a start and that we will have a better committee chamber in the future. Live Johnsrud is right that this room is very formal.

I thank all the witnesses for their evidence. We plan to take more evidence and we may return to the issue in the future. We will stop for a few minutes to allow for the change of witnesses.

10:53

*Meeting suspended.*

10:58

*On resuming—*

**The Convener:** I welcome our second group of witnesses to the Equal Opportunities Committee, which is taking evidence on the Local Governance (Scotland) Bill. Lorna Ahlquist is from the 50/50 Campaign, and Sue Robertson and Fran Loots are from Engender. We have many witnesses this morning, so we will go straight to questions.

Will the Local Governance (Scotland) Bill's provisions on proportional representation and electoral wards have a positive impact on women's representation in local government?

**Fran Loots (Engender):** The provisions are a start but they are not enough in themselves. For instance, the single transferable vote system could increase the number of women, but there could be problems if the district margins were too small. Our overwhelming feeling is that a package of change must be considered in order to increase the number of women in local government. Some of those elements are contained in the bill, but we need to go further.

11:00

**Sue Robertson (Engender):** We certainly have concerns that the suggested ward size of three to four members is too small. Evidence from elsewhere suggests that a minimum of five members would be a much better size to encourage wider representation of women.

**Lorna Ahlquist (50/50 Campaign):** Issues to do with the ordering of candidates on ballot papers must also be considered. The system will help, but

unless other aspects of it are considered, it will not deliver the diversity that might be sought.

**The Convener:** Is there a danger that political parties will not prioritise, and that although there could be enough women on the lists, they will not be near enough the top to be successful?

**Lorna Ahlquist:** Yes. There is a huge issue around the selection process and a lot of work must be done on the whole political culture. There can be quotas and women can get on to lists, but there will be issues unless those women contest winnable seats. On the evidence so far, the selection procedures are not up to the normal standards of equal opportunities selection processes in employment.

**The Convener:** So five-member wards would probably be more positive for women's representation.

**Lorna Ahlquist:** Yes.

**Mrs Milne:** My question is about five-councillor wards. I have listened to evidence that has been given to other committees and I think that there is a general feeling that three or four-councillor wards would be too small for proportional representation to work for some smaller political parties, as well as for women. Can you elaborate on that, or do you think that we have covered five-member wards adequately, as far as women are concerned?

**Sue Robertson:** I think that we are saying that there should be a minimum of five members, although there could be more.

**Mrs Milne:** Obviously, all councils are different. There are rural councils that cover big geographic areas and there are close-knit city councils. Do you think that five members should be the minimum number in all those wards?

**Sue Robertson:** Yes.

**Lorna Ahlquist:** That should probably be the case. However, other things, such as job sharing, might help in rural areas and might allow better patterns of working for councillors.

**Elaine Smith:** I want to pick up on that point. Dr Fiona Mackay's paper talks about "Women-friendliness' and STV". She states:

"Some commentators see STV as a largely gender-neutral electoral system. It neither detrimentally impacts upon women candidates ... but neither does it positively impact".

She goes on to say:

"Others view it as relatively disadvantageous to women"

and talks about low district magnitudes, which I think were mentioned earlier. She states:

"a smaller proportion of women are returned under STV

to the Irish Dáil ... than under FPTP to the Westminster House of Commons".

Do you agree with that? It has been said in some quarters that proportional representation will help to increase women's representation. Will it do so in and of itself or will it depend on the type of system used and on other work being done?

**Fran Loots:** As I said earlier, a wider package must be considered. In general, proportional representation has a better chance of increasing women's representation, but the single transferable vote system has limitations. However, Westminster legislation could be reinforced by the Local Governance (Scotland) Bill in respect of positive action in the selection of candidates. We must use what is there and reinforce measures that are available.

**Elaine Smith:** I would like to discuss positive action. I do not know whether you have heard concerns that have been expressed previously about what has been called positive discrimination rather than positive action. Perhaps that is how some previous witnesses view it. The responses to the Executive's consultation should be considered. The Transport and General Workers Union, for example, suggested that there should be two-member wards in which one female member and one male member would be required. There is also a suggestion that multimember wards should be gender balanced, with rules saying that at least one woman should be elected in a three-member ward, and at least two in a four-member ward. What are your views on that?

**Sue Robertson:** That is a difficult question. Various mechanisms can be used, but two factors should be taken into account: the general system and the ward size, and the actions that parties may take to balance their representation within the system. It is difficult to make a quick judgment about that, with those factors being thrown together. There is a need for each party to seek mechanisms that will work for it. Various methods have been used with respect to boosting the number of women in the Scottish Parliament. The lessons need to be drawn from that and then considered in relation to local government.

The length of time for which people are elected to local government is a further issue. The fact that the Scottish Parliament was a new institution was a major factor, and there was not the problem of incumbents. It is difficult to know how this could be introduced into the system, but there is a potential question over whether people should be limited in how long they can serve in local government. Otherwise, any system that seeks to widen representation will be up against people who have been in place for a long time and who think that they have every right to continue there for a long time.

**Elaine Smith:** I would assume that, in a new system, the issue of incumbents might not be so considerable. Do you have any views on accountability to the electorate in wards with a greater number of members, where there could be a positive impact on gender balance?

**Sue Robertson:** That is clearly an issue—the bigger the ward, the more people are concerned. People might feel that they know their various councillors less well. That aside, some local government councillors are in cabinet-type arrangements, while others work more at a constituency level. The larger ward size might present an opportunity for both types of councillor to represent the same ward. Some might be involved at the executive level of local government; others might work more in the constituency. There would not be so much of a divorce under those circumstances. There are pros and cons under any system.

**Lorna Ahlquist:** There are a lot of issues around people's disaffection with the political process. If diversity is increased, that might help to get away from some aspects of that and improve people's relationship with the process. There are dangers in sticking with what we have now, as opposed to moving to enhanced diversity. Perhaps the councillor-ward link is of more concern to the councillors than it is to the electorate. We need to find out what the electorate feels. Their disaffection must be got over, and we have to take measures that move us on in that respect.

**Elaine Smith:** We can leave the issue of direct accountability to one side for the moment.

I move on to discuss the remuneration system for councillors. One argument says that women should be elected on ability. Fine—but only 22 per cent of those who are serving in local government are women, and I am quite sure that that is not because women are unable to fulfil the roles. Under the suggested new system of remuneration, a limited number of payments would reflect the additional responsibilities involved, but there would be more of a salary structure. A pension scheme and severance arrangements would also be involved, with an independent committee to advise on remuneration packages. Would those measures help?

The policy memorandum states:

"many councillors are finding it increasingly difficult to combine their role as a councillor with other activities, such as employment, childcare or caring responsibilities etc."

Do you think that the remuneration and pension proposals in particular would encourage more women to stand for election, or would they need to be included as part of a package?

**Fran Loots:** As it stands, the pension proposal is to be welcomed, but the remuneration really

needs to go further. In terms of candidates for the last election and councillors who are in position now, one in three women have to make special arrangements for child care. For men, the number is far fewer—it is one in 10. The reality is still that women bear the majority of responsibility for child care. My understanding is that the proposed amount is about £12,000, which is quite low, when one takes into account child-care costs. The whole area needs to be revisited. Kerley said that separate care costs would not be considered, but that is a huge barrier for women. Part of the Scottish Parliament's attraction for women is that remuneration is such that child-care costs can be borne within it. I would not, with two children to find care for—let alone additional responsibilities that might fall my way—consider any position in local government that paid £12,000.

**Sue Robertson:** There is a difficulty in that women are economically disadvantaged compared to men. The comparatively small amount of money that is available for work in local government is going to be a major stumbling block, especially for women who are self-supporting, and it will be particularly difficult for lone parents. That has to be looked at. Job sharing could be helpful in making it easier for people to do the job part time.

**Elaine Smith:** Engender's submission makes the point about women councillors having to make child-care arrangements. It also says:

"A support package for councillors that includes appropriate child-care and takes account of the wider caring role of women is needed."

I gather from that that you are not talking simply about remuneration to allow women to pay for child care—to hire a nanny, pay for a nursery, or whatever—but about crèche provision to allow women councillors to attend meetings. Are you talking about special arrangements for time off for carers, if required? Are you looking for something over and above remuneration, such as the voucher system that the Scottish Parliament has? That is not a huge amount, but it sends a message to other employers and public bodies that we want to encourage that kind of support.

**Sue Robertson:** We are talking about some kind of direct subsidy of care costs, whether child care costs or costs of care of dependents, if there are such costs involved. That would certainly help. We are also talking about the timing of activities and meetings, which includes council meetings and party group meetings. There is a raft of issues around how we can make activity more family friendly.

**Lorna Ahlquist:** We really need to look at the family friendliness of council meetings, and so on. Where I live, it is hard to access child care. There is an issue about access to care for children and

care for dependent older people, so access to such care needs to be put in place. If there were good systems locally, there would be less of an issue. There is an issue about money, but there is also an issue about accessibility of care, especially in rural areas.

**Mrs Milne:** Job sharing has been mentioned a couple of times. I have served on a council under the present system. A councillor who is allocated a place on a planning committee or whatever builds up expertise over time on the issues that come before that committee. He or she builds up a case load in relation to constituents and so on. Have you had any thought about the practicalities? I cannot imagine how job sharing would work, so have you had any thoughts about how it would work in practice?

11:15

**Sue Robertson:** It does not seem that councillors job sharing would, in principle, be all that different from a paid job, in which people work out between them how to handle things.

**Fran Loots:** I have worked on several job shares. They work best if one person takes a lead in a particular area. Councillors are usually on several committees. So, if councillors were to job share, one would take the lead in certain committees and the other would take the lead on others. If, for example, one councillor falls ill, the other could step in because they would have enough background information. However, major responsibility for progressing work from a committee would fall to the councillor who was the lead in that committee. Posts that are quite senior have been job shared; it should not be beyond the realms of creativity to manage job sharing within local government.

**Lorna Ahlquist:** There is a lot of bias against part-time working and job sharing. There has been for a long time, but there are ways of making them work. On the issues around accountability to the electorate, job sharing and acceptability of women candidates to the electorate, many of the assumptions that are made—and many myths—can be debunked by having the right systems, structures and processes in place to enable the arrangements to work. Good support being provided to councillors makes such practices easier.

**Marlyn Glen:** Some of the issues that I will raise have been touched on previously. My questions are about the procedures that have been put in place. The councillors' remuneration progress group is examining the new system of remuneration for councillors, their role, their time commitment and their salary. Those relate to many of the issues that you have been talking

about. What factors that relate to the working practices and pay of councillors do you feel the progress group should give particular consideration to in order to encourage the participation of women?

**Fran Loots:** As you said, we have covered a number of those issues. The solution is to have a more family-friendly approach in the first place. There are also issues about changing the culture and how politics is perceived. One of the factors that encouraged women into the Scottish Parliament was that they perceived that there was an opportunity to have a new kind of politics; there was a different framework within which to operate. The ground rules that were laid down were seen as being more open.

We do a lot of training with women in the community and voluntary sectors. We invite in a female local councillor to share some of her experiences of being in the decision-making process. We often ask afterwards whether the women at the meeting would consider standing for local government; the answer has been, overwhelmingly, "No". The response is predominantly about the culture that is perceived within local government. We know that there are stunning women with loads of skills and abilities, but their attitudes to and perceptions of the culture within local government are a real barrier.

**Lorna Ahlquist:** The cultural aspect of the matter is important. In the 50/50 Campaign, I speak to women who are in political parties and so on. The methods of campaigning, the selection processes and the culture within which they must operate are very hard for women, so that must change if access is to be widened. The current culture suits a certain type of person and it must be widened to suit a wider range of people and to attract women and other groups. It must be based much more on an equalities framework.

Consider the evidence from the research that the Fawcett Society has done in England on political parties: comments that are made by women are that there is overt discrimination, sexual harassment, barriers in selection processes, lack of support and a "favoured sons" attitude. Those huge barriers must be dismantled, but it will take a really big effort to do it. We must consider ways in which we can change the culture and we must take positive action to do that.

**Marlyn Glen:** It is important that we have such comments on the record. Are there any issues that you would like to highlight for the progress group, which it might address to encourage people on lower incomes or who have family commitments to participate?

**Lorna Ahlquist:** The issues are around remuneration, access to child care, care services

and so on. There is a need to assign funds to political parties to enable them to promote women, because my perception is that women in parties find it hard to meet, hard to get together, hard to support each other, and hard to influence the processes in their parties.

There is a huge need to use support mechanisms from outside parties. I am thinking in terms of the equality networks in the Highlands and Islands that are aimed at the voluntary sector. There are no such support mechanisms for political processes, but there is a huge need for them, which Engender discovered in work that it did in the run-up to the Scottish Parliament's being set up. Opportunities should be provided for women to get together in a cross-party way to share issues and support each other, as is done with the 50/50 Campaign. There is a need to support women who are isolated from influencing the process. Processes have to be set up and money has to be provided to make the change.

**Marlyn Glen:** The bill proposes an independent Scottish local authority remuneration committee to determine the details of the policies. Do you have any comments on the establishment of that committee and how it should operate?

**Fran Loots:** Success will depend on the committee's remit, and whether addressing of the remuneration package includes selection processes and so on. If the remit is narrow it will be more difficult—

**Marlyn Glen:** It depends on the detail of how it will work.

**Fran Loots:** Yes.

**Lorna Ahlquist:** The issue is who will be on the committee on how it will work.

**Sue Robertson:** There needs to be research into what would make a difference to excluded groups in terms of people in such groups standing for election to local government, which is difficult for people who have to be self-supporting because of a combination of things. It is difficult financially if one has to be self-supporting and it is difficult in terms of time if one is trying to do a paid job, look after family responsibilities and look after political issues. More background research is required on what puts people off and on what would make a difference, otherwise we are operating in the dark. It is difficult to examine any of the issues in isolation. There should be more discussion with groups about what would make them willing to stand.

**Lorna Ahlquist:** There is an issue of how to get into the whole process in the first place. A person who wanted to be a councillor came to me and asked how she could have her children looked after. She cannot even start on the ladder. A

person who stood said that her election agent was her child minder while she was campaigning. There is no level playing field, unless a candidate has an angel for an election agent and a council that provides facilities.

**Shiona Baird:** Have any of you been involved in the work of the widening access to council membership progress group?

**Sue Robertson:** No.

**Shiona Baird:** The group has been set up to take forward work on making council membership more attractive to a wider cross-section of the community. It will make recommendations on the training, development and support that are given to councillors. Which issues in relation to women's representation do you recommend require particular attention from the progress group?

**Fran Loots:** There are huge issues around the selection process. We know from research by the Equal Opportunities Commission that there is perceived to be a lot of discrimination at parliamentary level. There is no reason to think that that does not apply to local government. In its submission to the Local Government and Transport Committee in December, the EOC suggested a checklist for the process.

Examination of the requirements in the open job market shows that most good employers consider equal opportunities practice, but that does not appear to apply to the selection process for local government candidates. Work certainly has to be done to address things at that level. The problem is perceptions: many people think that who will be selected is a done deal and that it is difficult to influence the process. That is a key area that should be considered.

As Sue Robertson mentioned earlier, the step before that is to gain more knowledge about the barriers. We have a complete lack of diversity—there is poor representation of black and minority ethnic communities, people with disabilities, people from the gay, lesbian and transgender population, and women. There are huge areas that require further work.

**Sue Robertson:** I spoke earlier about limits on people's time. A lot of women are interested in what they can achieve in any government setting, whether it be local government or the Scottish Parliament. One of the things that works against that is the sense that someone has to be there for a long time before they can get anywhere. A lot of women do not have time in their lives for such a long-term, grinding commitment before they can achieve what they went there for in the first place. That is a big culture issue because among people who are there already there is hostility towards people who are perceived as taking shortcuts. We will never improve diversity unless we accept that

people who have lots of other pressures in their lives have to be able to get into something and be able to advance more quickly. That should be considered.

**Lorna Ahlquist:** Equality standards must be applied to selection processes and there should be monitoring and procedures for appeals and complaints. Dr Fiona Mackay's paper suggested that rules of engagement are incredibly important within and between parties. The Equality Network and I have spoken about the huge need for such rules in engaging with the media as well as among political parties and in political debate. We need to raise those standards and make them far more ethical than the current horse-trading, which brings politics into disrepute. Rules of engagement and equality standards have to be put in place.

**The Convener:** The Engender submission comments on how candidates lack the confidence to put themselves forward, whether they are women or not. How can we overcome such barriers? In local government, perhaps even more than in the Scottish Parliament, the atmosphere can be quite aggressive. How do we encourage women to put themselves forward and change some of that?

**Fran Loots:** There is a role for training and women-only training on a cross-party basis and within parties. Some parties, particularly constituency parties, make some moves in that direction, but they are sporadic and fragmented. We should provide a culture that welcomes women and measures should be taken on different fronts to achieve that.

When women get together and can see potential, results are similar to what we have seen in the Scottish Parliament. That did not come about by accident; there was a movement that allowed it to happen through pressure from lots of different places that said that we need change and we need more women. We need to create such an atmosphere in local government.

**The Convener:** There was a lot of early judgment about the cultural differences between the men and women, or perhaps between those who had been in the political system a bit longer or had worked in a particular way. At the start of the Scottish Parliament, the women were not seen as sounding or looking the same. That can be quite difficult.

**Fran Loots:** It can be difficult. In the training that we do, we discuss the media impact and how negative it was. It takes a while to overcome such negative perceptions. The evidence from much of the research on women in leadership and management shows that, in the culture at large, women often have more negative press. That is why it is even more important to use a raft of

measures to create a culture that allows women and minority groups to come forward.

11:30

**Lorna Ahlquist:** There is a need for clear leadership and clear messages at all levels of Scottish society. There is also a need for a huge input of support and training. When I did some research before meeting Tanzanian women MPs who came over here, it was quite a shock to me to realise that the British Council had provided for them £1 million in support that went from the grass roots right to the top: they had support on a massive scale. That happens across the world, yet we have virtually no support and training here in Scotland. We have tiny packages of training that we struggle to provide.

**Sue Robertson:** We struggle to fund those packages, as well. Most of the funding is short term and is not built into the system.

**The Convener:** The Kerley report recommended that councils should review their arrangements and organisation and consider whether they contain factors that impact on women's participation. Fiona Mackay's written evidence states:

"Political parties and local authorities should be encouraged or required to undertake a review of the potential barriers to the full participation of women, minority ethnic communities, disabled people and others".

How should we overcome those barriers and issues?

**Lorna Ahlquist:** We have already covered many of those barriers, such as culture, attitudes, lack of family-friendly hours and difficulties that are caused by the style of decision making.

Auditing is an incredibly important idea—it is about an organisation looking at itself and identifying the barriers and problems. The evidence from the EOC says basically that political parties and organisations must look at themselves and design processes in such a way as to open up the problems within those organisations. Such organisations might have standard frameworks, but until those are examined, we will not know exactly what is happening under them.

The hardest problems to tackle are attitudinal. Although most people would sign up to equality, when they are asked whether they are doing anything about it, one finds that nothing is happening or that their underlying attitudes come out. I certainly recommend to anybody the superb play that 7:84 Theatre Company (Scotland) Ltd staged at our 50/50 Campaign conference. The play shows how, despite the overt commitment to equality, there are deep-seated problems in shifting our attitudes and in changing the way that we deal with equality.



**Sue Robertson:** A key thing, to which Cathy Peattie alluded, is expectations. Where councillors, for example, have operated relatively unencumbered by domestic factors, expectations about the work that they do will have been shaped by that. Women who come in with lots of domestic responsibilities will struggle with such a work load. For diversity, it is important that we make jobs manageable, no matter whether they are paid or elected positions. There must be a realisation that people cannot be expected to do ridiculous amounts of work at the same time as they do all the other things in their lives.

**The Convener:** Lorna Ahlquist suggested some sort of audit system for local authorities. If local authorities adhered to the mainstreaming agenda, would that make the kind of difference that we aspire to make?

**Fran Loots:** For a long time in local authorities, there has been a push at officer level for things such as equal opportunities training and raising of awareness levels. There has often been talk about providing the same for elected members but, as far as I am aware, that has not happened. That is an area that should be considered.

**The Convener:** I thank you all very much for your evidence this morning. We have a long meeting this morning, so it is important that we hear as much as we can from the organisations that come before us.

We will stop for two minutes to allow a change of witnesses.

11:35

*Meeting suspended.*

11:39

*On resuming—*

**The Convener:** I reconvene the meeting by warmly welcoming the final panel of witnesses, who are Ron Skinner MBE, of the Scottish Disability Equality Forum; Rami Ousta of the Black and Ethnic Minority Infrastructure in Scotland Ltd; and Kemi Adebayo of Multi Ethnic Aberdeen Ltd.

I remind everyone that we are still taking evidence on the Local Governance (Scotland) Bill. Our priority is to promote wider participation, so we really want to hear what the witnesses have to say. My colleagues and I will ask questions right away; please feel free to answer as appropriate.

What are the biggest barriers for people from ethnic minorities and people with disabilities who want to participate in local government?

**Rami Ousta (Black and Ethnic Minority Infrastructure in Scotland):** It would have been

easier for me to name the aspects that are not barriers, especially for black and ethnic minorities.

As everyone knows, black and ethnic minorities continue to be underrepresented at policy and decision making levels. I do not mean only MSP representation at the Scottish Parliament; for example, I think that there are only nine or 10 ethnic minority community councillors in local authorities throughout the country. That situation is associated with other barriers and, indeed, reflects the way that the political parties have been playing the ethnic minority card to exclude certain communities. Until now, there has been no acknowledgement of the diversity of the black and ethnic minority communities in Scotland. White people tend to encourage participation from the two major ethnic minorities at the expense of other community groups. Moreover, the current voting system is also a barrier to communities; however, we believe that the system that is proposed in the bill contains some opportunities.

On capacity building, the lack of skills and engagement of black and ethnic minority communities keeps the people in those communities away from the whole political process of council elections. That said, those who have the chance to be elected as councillors are always chosen by political parties to serve a purpose instead of to serve communities. I find it funny that political parties nominate people to be councillors irrespective of whether they have the appropriate skills only in areas that are heavily populated with ethnic minorities. Political parties are concerned only with winning seats: that approach causes a lot of damage in our communities. They should stop taking such a tokenistic approach and encourage people in our communities to put themselves forward for nomination as councillors.

Another barrier is institutional and social racism. Members of our communities still believe that being a councillor is not for them and that they do not have a chance to be involved. Moreover, people feel that the councillors who have served our communities do not have the right skills to do so. The general image is that black and ethnic minority communities do not have the skills to become councillors. On the contrary, however, very excellent professionals not only from one or two particular communities but from the diverse range of communities would be able to serve us. However, those people do not get the chance to have their voices heard at local authority or even at policy development level.

As I said, ethnic minority communities continue to be disadvantaged at various levels, no matter whether we are talking about lack of resources, lack of skills or lack of involvement. A conference that we held recently targeted the role of black and ethnic minority communities in the community

planning and engagement process. Of course, that relates directly to the local authorities. The outcome of the conference was frustrating: most of the groups that were involved believe that councillors and councils are happy to engage with the gatekeepers of the communities, but not with the communities themselves, and that the councils gradually build up such people to become councillors while the other communities become more and more isolated.

Again, as I said, people in ethnic minority communities feel that being a councillor is not for them. They think, "What can I do? What changes can I make?" They believe that they will never get the chance to carry out that work. In that respect, women from black and ethnic minorities are at a double disadvantage, which is partly because of cultural and religious issues. However, that does not mean that there are no women in those communities who could fulfil such a role. Indeed, such women have worked in the voluntary sector for years and have the skills to do the job. As a result, we believe that the voluntary sector should be encouraged to nominate or to allow its workers to become councillors.

I am happy to answer questions.

11:45

**Kemi Adebayo (Multi Ethnic Aberdeen Limited):** I want to follow on from some of Rami Ousta's comments without repeating any of the points that he identified about barriers. We should address the culture of differences and the lack of understanding of, and information about, how the system works. I think that one of the major problems is terminology. For example, I am an African and know a lot of women and men who are politicians or who are involved in political parties back home. However, when they come to this country, most of them feel that they do not understand the system, that there is nothing in it for them and that they cannot make a difference. In fact, I am aware of a few people now studying in Aberdeen who were key active politicians back in Nigeria; however, they will not vote or even register to vote.

There is an issue around the terminology that is used, beginning with the term "minority ethnic". Some people do not even understand the term when they come here, and will ask, "What are minority ethnic communities?" Some of them are not prepared to find out. There is also the issue of how the media negatively portray minority ethnic communities, so that it is believed, for example, that everybody is an asylum seeker or has certain issues. That discourages many people from getting into the voting system. As Rami Ousta said, there needs to be a lot of capacity built in for those who are interested in pursuing the training and skills that they will need.

There are other barriers to do with child care. Women have to consider how they take care of their children here. Back home in Nigeria—and in the Asian community—many people rely on extended family support, but there is none of that over here. There is therefore a problem with people not having home helps and so on. Some people are totally discouraged because they do not know where to put their children.

I agree with Rami Ousta about tokenistic gestures in some of the electoral groups: just enough is done to tick a box. Last year, I was approached to stand in my area. I was also approached five years ago, and I said "No, forget it", because I had just moved and was trying to understand the system. Although I did not think that I had the time, I took up the offer last year, mainly because I wanted to show other people in my community that they actually do have the opportunity to do the same thing and to put their names forward. At the start, I wondered whether it was just a tokenistic gesture by the party, just to get a name forward. I signed up to what the party was about, but it was not a question of party issues for me; it was more about serving the community and being able to deliver.

At election time, I went around distributing leaflets and, to an extent, I was thinking that I did not want to win because I did not have the time. On the one hand, I did not want to do it but on the other hand, I wanted to do it so that I could give other people a chance and show them that they could do the same. I was really pleased with the result—I achieved it without putting into it as much thought as I might have. I am trying to mentor other people whom I know and who have an interest in politics. They will often talk about things on the sidelines in private debates and so on but either do not have the courage to take part or have the courage, but feel disengaged from the system.

**Ron Skinner MBE (Scottish Disability Equality Forum):** I can perhaps put into perspective the representation of minority groups on local councils for my sector—the disability sector. According to the figures from the 2001 census, 20 per cent of the Scottish population have a long-term illness. That is 25 per cent more than the figures that members were given in evidence from the Disability Rights Commission, which talked about 800,000 people. It is important that the issues that affect that proportion of the population are understood and addressed.

We have to take a reality check. Not every disabled person could ever stand for a council. The important thing is that every person who has a disability should be able to reach their potential. A distinction must be drawn between the two generic types of disability: the physical disability, which I have—I am lucky, in that it is apparent to all—and

sensory impairment, which can be visual or otherwise.

I declare an interest to the committee: I have been in local government for 30 years and I have been connected with local government for 40 years, so I know a wee bit about it. I have used a wheelchair during my entire council career. There are not many physical access barriers for disabled councillors. Notable disabled people have been involved in local government. The late Peter McCann, a former lord provost of Glasgow, is one prime example. A member of Fife Council is a wheelchair user and I believe that there was also one in Perth and Kinross Council. Having been around most of the council offices in Scotland except Shetland, where I have never been, I believe that there are no physical barriers that make it difficult for disabled people to be councillors. Glasgow city chambers can present a problem for a disabled person because its seating consists of tiered pews, but if they are a back bencher and have to sit at the back, that is okay.

I believe that the main barrier to being a councillor is one of passion. If someone has the passion to do something, they would automatically become a councillor.

**The Convener:** Do you believe that the bill's provisions for proportional representation and electoral wards will have a positive impact on widening the representation of ethnic minorities and people with disabilities in local government? Will the bill make a difference?

**Rami Ousta:** The spirit of the bill is excellent and the bill will make a difference. However, although we might be able to get two or three ethnic minority candidates for wards in areas that are heavily populated by ethnic minorities, I wonder how the bill's provisions will work in isolated areas in the Highlands and Islands, the Borders and the Galloway area, where small ethnic minorities do not have any representation. Will the bill's provisions disadvantage them or help them?

I believe that, with proper support from the Government and their communities, the bill's provisions will enable independent people from ethnic minority communities to put forward their names as councillors. Chances will be opened up for various people, if they get support from outwith the political parties.

Disability is also a key issue. We acknowledge that black and ethnic minority communities are not the only disadvantaged groups; disabled people and women are similarly disadvantaged. However, disability among black and ethnic minority groups is a double problem because, in some cases, a stigma is attached to the family of a disabled person. Therefore, support for disabled people

from those groups is essential if they are to have a chance of becoming councillors.

If people from ethnic minority groups are to be encouraged to become council candidates, money is a big issue, even for the basics such as having an election campaign. That is why we get the same ethnic minority councillors repeatedly. The same group is elected in every election because they get the political support and the required finance through their businesses. People from poorer families never think about being council candidates because they could not afford even to pay for an election campaign.

**The Convener:** Do other panel members wish to comment on whether the bill will make a difference?

**Kemi Adebayo:** Like any other bill, the bill should make a difference, and I hope that it will, but the question is how many in minority ethnic communities are aware of it and its contents. If we are not aware of legislation, how can we expect it to work for us as well as for others? There must be education about the Local Governance (Scotland) Bill to increase awareness of it and to let minority ethnic people know that it will make a difference to them. They should have been more involved in the consultation process.

**Elaine Smith:** Good morning. I want to move on to remuneration. If the bill is enacted as it stands, it will introduce for councillors

"a new system of remuneration, supplemented by a limited number of payments to reflect members' additional responsibilities".

The bill also plans to introduce a pension scheme and a severance arrangement for councillors.

My question is for Kemi Adebayo first, because of something that she said earlier, but it is fine if the other panel members want to address it. The bill's policy memorandum says that many councillors are finding it increasingly difficult to combine their role as a councillor with other activities such as employment, child care or caring responsibilities—Kemi specifically mentioned child care issues. Is the remuneration and pension proposal likely to encourage a more diverse range of people to stand for election to local authorities? In answering that, will you pay specific attention to people with children or those with caring responsibilities?

**Kemi Adebayo:** Like I said, the remuneration and pension proposal will be an incentive to people. When I first approached my female and minority ethnic friends and asked them what they thought about my being invited to stand for election, the first thing they said was that they hoped I knew that I would not get paid anything apart from £8,000 or £6,000 a year for expenses. I laughed and told them that, for me, the point was

not to get money but to serve the public and the community. In return, they asked how many of them could get by on such an amount when they have other expenses to meet and said that it was okay for me because my husband was working. That is how we have to think about the question.

I cannot remember whether a specific amount has been suggested for the remuneration but, whatever it is, it will be useful for child care and so on. At the moment, many people feel that they could not afford to leave their paid job, even if they are not being paid a lot of money. They might get £8,000 a year, but they know that they will be working more than 48 hours a week and that they will have no time off because people in their area will be able to call them morning, evening and night.

**Elaine Smith:** On child care, is the issue solely to do with remuneration or is it also to do with accessibility? For example, would it be important for a crèche to be made available when you attend a meeting?

**Kemi Adebayo:** Yes. Before I came to the committee, I checked the train times back to Aberdeen and realised that I will miss the 12:10 train and will have to get the 13:10 train. I usually pick up my children from school—this year, I made it a point of duty to do that—but, as I will be unable to do so today, I had to telephone somebody and ask them to do it instead. If I knew that my kids were safely in a crèche, I would be able to attend meetings without worrying about them.

**Elaine Smith:** Convener, perhaps we should take that issue into account when we arrange the order in which we will deal with witnesses. It might be better to take certain people before others for the reason that we have just heard.

**Kemi Adebayo:** I think that it is my fault for not checking the timetable.

**Ron Skinner:** I think that having remuneration for councillors would be a positive step, particularly for people with disabilities who might be on state benefits. It is argued that the loss of those benefits would be a disincentive but, while most of the benefits are means tested, the disability living allowance is not and so would not be lost. I do not think that you can have your cake and eat it. Provided that the remuneration is set at a realistic level, it would attract people to get involved.

I do not think that it would be beyond the wit of the legislative draftsmen to draft something that would specifically cover the extra costs that might be incurred by someone who is disabled, going about their duties—for example, to pay for a carer to see them out of the car and into the building. It would be much easier for the councillor who has the disability and the administrator if such

remuneration were specifically dealt with in legislation, as there would be no onus to prove that a cost of that kind was incurred as the councillor went about their duty. Such an arrangement could cover child care as well.

12:00

**Elaine Smith:** Before we move on to—

**The Convener:** I think that Rami Ousta wanted to comment.

**Rami Ousta:** Am I allowed to?

**Elaine Smith:** I had a specific question for Ron Skinner, but please go ahead and I will go back to him.

**Rami Ousta:** Go ahead. I will wait until you have finished with Ron.

**Elaine Smith:** I wanted to pick up on a specific thing that Ron said. You talked about the financial disincentive. In its submission to the Local Government and Transport Committee, the Disability Rights Commission said:

“There must therefore be consideration of how to neutralise financial disincentives, such as concern over loss of welfare benefit support, support for personal carer assistance or any other additional costs incurred due to a person's impairment.”

Do you not agree with that?

**Ron Skinner:** No.

**Elaine Smith:** So you would categorically disagree with that statement.

**Ron Skinner:** Yes. I do not think that the DRC has researched that specific issue in depth and brought out the examples. Before coming to the committee, I had a ring round a number of friends who are deeply involved in the benefits side and that is the answer that they are coming to me with. Obviously, income support is the prime example. If someone is in employment and they are above a certain level, they will lose income support, but within income support there are hidden passports to other types of free services, such as eye tests and dental treatment. I abide by my comment that one cannot have one's cake and eat it.

**Elaine Smith:** Can I also be clear that you were saying that you would like some account to be taken of the cost of that, either in the bill or in the accompanying documents? For example, the Parliament has a budget so that, if a member employs someone with a disability and has to change their office for access reasons, a particular amount of money can be accessed. Is that the kind of thing that you are talking about in relation to the bill?

**Ron Skinner:** Yes. I am always wary of putting down financial limits. I think that the test would be whether the expenditure incurred was reasonable.

**Elaine Smith:** You are saying that some money should be ring fenced for that. Is that correct?

**Ron Skinner:** Yes.

**Elaine Smith:** I am sorry, Rami, but I felt that I should pick up on those points as they were made.

**Rami Ousta:** That is fine. I just want to confirm that the section on remuneration is excellent for our community. We are aware of various groups, members of which would love to stand as councillors. The main concern, especially among those from unrepresented groups—we are talking about communities such as the Arab community, Gypsy Travellers, the Jewish community and the African community—is that there is nothing in it for them. They have a job that supports their families; they would not lose it to be a councillor when there is no incentive for them to do that. The proposal is also essential for women—for child care and support.

If we twist round the Machiavellian idea of the end justifying the means to say that the means should justify the end, the reason behind the remuneration package is to encourage more equality among our councillors. That is excellent, but we do not want it to be the main incentive; there should be other support mechanisms for groups that are willing to participate. For example, one of my ideas is that, one year before any local election, there should be induction programmes—not just for people from the ethnic minorities, but for people from all communities—on what a councillor's job involves, how to go about being a councillor, what support is available and so on. Such programmes should be run in each area and the voluntary sector should have a big role in involving their communities in, and educating them about, the process. It would be excellent if that were provided in addition to the financial package.

We have to let those who apply to be councillors know that they will also have responsibilities to our communities. We do not want to have black and ethnic minority faces in councils just to say that we have those faces there; we want those people to have the right skills and to be supported. I am a believer in the fact that we do not want to see a face from those communities if the representative does not have the skills; we want people who can support those communities and engage with them. The proposed package is excellent, but other support mechanisms to help both the councillors and the communities should be there as well.

**Elaine Smith:** You make an interesting point, which perhaps goes back to something that the previous witnesses mentioned about the British Council, which provides support for Tanzanian women who become MPs. I know about that, because last year I was shadowed by a Tanzanian woman MP for a week. Are such shadowing

arrangements the type of thing that you are talking about?

**Kemi Adebayo:** Shadowing was one of the ways of improving the situation that I had thought of. That would work, because people would do it because they had an interest in doing it rather than because they were forced to do it. That would give people the opportunity to see what the commitment is and to make a decision. We should not just lump together women, ethnic minority communities and disabled people.

A lot of things are being done in schools to encourage citizenship. Young people in schools could shadow MPs or local councillors as projects, which would help when they decide about their future. At present, education is given when some of them have made up their minds and have set ideas. We need to educate young people, ethnic minority women, young girls and people with disabilities. My colleague said that some people suffer from double discrimination, but it could even be triple discrimination. For example, a person could have a disability, be a woman and be black. In fact, the discrimination could be four times—the person could also live in a disadvantaged area. We need to work on such issues.

**Ron Skinner:** I echo the point about training. There ought to be regular training for councillors. I do not know whether it is possible to have continuous professional development, but it would be useful to have a proper training programme. I have come across many chairmen who had no idea how to conduct a meeting or of their responsibilities and duties when they assumed the chair. Sorry, convener, I am in no way making any inferences about you.

**The Convener:** Not at all. I went through half my political career thinking that one had to be a man to be in the chair.

Does the issue go further than training for councillors or potential councillors? It seems to me that people do not consider standing, as Rami Ousta said. Does there need to be a wider active citizenship programme—we could call it whatever we like—that gives people the opportunity to consider their role as citizens and how systems work? It would be scary for people to consider standing as an elected member if they were not aware that they could make a difference. One organisation in my area works with communities to allow them to consider what is happening in councils and the Parliament. Would it be helpful to support voluntary organisations that help people to consider local governance and their role as community members?

**Rami Ousta:** That is not helpful; it is essential. We are a national umbrella organisation for black and ethnic minority voluntary sector organisations

in Scotland. Through working with diverse community groups, we know that most councils' dealings with communities are through gatekeepers. Councils are happy to channel everything through those gatekeepers only, while the rest of the community continues to be disadvantaged and not involved.

My organisation's main objective is to engage properly with diverse communities and to enable them to have a voice and political representation, whether themselves or through connections. Local authorities should run induction programmes—either regularly or in the year before elections—to inform people that they have the right to be in local government and to educate them about their rights and how they can serve their communities. Councils should invest in people. The programmes should be for would-be councillors who might be interested in standing for election. The fact that we have the same councillors again and again puts people off standing. I have some radical ideas in that respect. I am afraid to say them, because you might kick me out, convener, so I will keep them to myself.

**The Convener:** There is no danger of my kicking you out.

**Rami Ousta:** We would like to encourage as many people from black and ethnic minority communities as possible to stand as councillors. That means diverse communities. As we know—it is not a secret—the Asian community and the Chinese community are well established in Scotland and have their experiences, which are mainly in the two major cities. However, other community groups that have been in Scotland for years and which actively serve their communities do not have the chance even to air their views or to participate in any forum or panel. Those are the groups that should be encouraged. Plenty of professionals among them would love to be councillors. Some disabled people's groups have the skills and would love to have councillors, but they think that only the political parties have the right to nominate candidates. We would like to open that up to our communities.

I repeat that the political parties are as guilty as the election system is. The parties approach only some groups, which involve mainly ethnic minority males. Because those groups' links with the community are established, council seats are secured for them. We do not want that. The job is not about having a seat on the council and being called a councillor; we want councillors to serve their communities. Councillors are supposed to be the link between the council and communities, but that is not happening, because only gatekeepers and some persons with interests are involved. It is our role to say, "Open up to the voluntary sector."

I have read some of the literature, all of which recommends involving the Convention of Scottish

Local Authorities. COSLA is excellent and we work closely with it, but the black and ethnic minority voluntary sector should have an active role in educating communities and organisations about rights to be elected and to stand as candidates. In response to further questions, I could give some of my ideas about how we can develop such a role.

**Ron Skinner:** Engagement, particularly with disabled people, is an issue. One peculiarity of disability is that people make decisions for disabled people, especially if they come from an institutional situation. In our organisation, which involves some 150 organisations that deal with different aspects of disability from the Shetlands to Dumfries and from the Western Isles to Aberdeen, we are trying a bottom-up approach and allowing those organisations to dictate to the umbrella body the issues that they want to be developed. Encouragement and engagement are difficult in our sector, but if the passion is felt, people will become councillors.

**Marlyn Glen:** I am tempted to ask more questions on that subject, but I will not because I hope that we will take more evidence on the matter another time. My next questions are about the groups that have been set up. The Scottish Executive has established the councillors' remuneration progress group to consider the new remuneration system for councillors and the role, time commitment and salary of councillors. What factors relating to councillors' working practice and pay should the group consider to encourage more diversity in council membership?

**Ron Skinner:** I would like the group to have exposure to the issues that concern my sector—the extra costs and difficulties of participation. If the group is aware of those matters, perhaps it can cover them in recommendations.

**Rami Ousta:** Issues that must be considered are councillors' skills and responsibilities, the financial situation of a councillor who may be from an under-represented group, which might involve considering family background—for example, women may have child-care responsibilities—and the costs of disability. The group should consider whether benefits should be secured and maintained for the councillor, who should not be punished for helping the community.

The remuneration package should support councillors to fulfil a role, but the finance should not become people's goal. I was worried about the section in the bill on severance pay for councillors. Although I support that idea 100 per cent, the fear is that some groups or councillors might look on it as a goal in itself and might think that, if someone is a councillor for three or four years, they can have the severance payment and relax. The payment should depend on the time served with the council. Support for disabled people's groups

and women's groups is essential. Councillors from under-represented groups, such as those who come from poor families, should also have support.

**The Convener:** Kemi, do you want to pick up on any points?

**Kemi Adebayo:** I agree with what Rami Ousta has said.

12:15

**Marlyn Glen:** The bill proposes to establish an independent Scottish local authorities remuneration committee to work on the detail of the policies. Do you have any comments on the establishment of that committee and on how it should operate?

**Rami Ousta:** There should be a monitoring system. The members of the committee should take equality into account—and not just in name—so that ethnic minorities, people with disabilities and other disadvantaged groups have a voice and can ensure that their needs are met. I have only a general idea of how the committee will work. Whether it will have to consult committees or individuals directly will be an issue. We will encourage the committee to get the different communities involved, even in rural areas—the Borders, for example.

**Kemi Adebayo:** I would go along with that, but I would add that a lot of small minority ethnic groups feel over-consulted. I would advise the committee to work with ethnic-led organisations—such as Black and Ethnic Minority Infrastructure in Scotland and Multi Ethnic Aberdeen Ltd—which work with such grass-roots groups. Those small groups do not even have paid staff and they get frustrated when they are over-consulted all the time on such issues. Most of them do not have the time and feel that they have told the Executive what they want. There has to be balance in consultation.

**Ron Skinner:** The remuneration committee should consult as widely as possible but take into account the fact that we can be over-consulted and not given sufficient time to respond. Our forum has 150 organisations, some of which may meet only every two months. The timescales for consultation can be difficult.

**Rami Ousta:** I have one other concern about the work of the remuneration committee. In some areas, black and ethnic minorities are under-represented on councils. In rural areas such as Aberdeenshire, Dumfries and Galloway or the Highlands and Islands, there are no black or ethnic minority councillors and the councils really do not understand black or ethnic minority issues. Perhaps there should be groups to support such

councils to ensure that the black and ethnic minority voice is heard. In our work with the councils, we have noticed that they do not have a clue about ethnic minority issues even though people from ethnic minorities live in the area. Perhaps a small committee of people from the diverse communities could help to support those councils. The remuneration committee could offer money to support that work.

**Shiona Baird:** My question is on the widening access to council membership progress group. Have any of the witnesses been involved with that group?

**Rami Ousta:** Funnily enough, no. Even though we are the umbrella organisation for the ethnic minority communities, we have never even heard of that group. I heard of it only through this committee, here.

**Shiona Baird:** Perhaps we should take up that issue.

Rami, you said that you had some radical ideas. What issues should the group look into? Do you feel free enough to share some of your ideas?

**Rami Ousta:** Yes, I do. I would like the group to open up to the diverse communities and to avoid working through the gatekeepers. That will not be a minor issue when the group deals with grass-roots community projects; it will be a major issue. There are always one, two or three individuals who are called ethnic minority leaders. However, we do not have leaders; we have communities and we would like to involve them. Any consultation by any group questions one or two individuals, who say, "Yes, we fulfilled so and so," but those are individuals. I repeat that we do not have leaders; we have communities. We would prefer that the group dealt with communities directly through consultations, workshops and focus groups than that it dealt just with individuals. The group on widening access should reach out to the diverse community groups to which nobody talks.

Although there should be continuity for councils' work, councillors should be limited to serving for one or two elections or for eight years. Fresh blood should come in—if we have the same councillors for 20 years, nobody else gets the chance to develop.

**Kemi Adebayo:** I go back to the power of the media, which we usually think of as being used negatively. In addition to having focus groups and so on, the media could be used in a positive way—for example, to invite communities to debates and discussions where people can talk about issues. People from minority ethnic communities should not be pigeonholed all the time, because other things interest them. In Aberdeen, when there is a phone-in on asylum issues or a similar issue, we are asked, "Do you

have a comment? Who can you refer us to?" However, it is different when it comes to arts programmes. Some of us are interested in the arts. Some of us write books. We need to open the debate wider, because although politicians serve their communities, they are also involved in other things.

**Shiona Baird:** Yes, you will have transport issues, for example.

**Kemi Adebayo:** Exactly. However, I never get phone calls on transport issues, because the media believe that I am an expert in a particular area. I echo what Rami Ousta said. I am from Africa, I am a member of a minority ethnic community and I have lived in Aberdeen for more than 13 years, but I stress that I am not speaking for the African community and I am not necessarily speaking for all women.

One of my ideas is that councillors or MSPs should attend cultural activities that ethnic communities organise, such as Eid or Chinese new year. They could talk to people on a one-to-one basis and build trust. In our communities, there are a lot of issues to do with trust. If we do not trust you, there will always be a problem. You need to go out and talk more. I know that sometimes you do not have the time, but I am just being honest.

Individual councillors need to take responsibility and ask, "What am I doing in my ward? Do I accept those invitations?" A lot of ethnic communities want to see councillors and politicians at their events, but they do not know how to approach them. They do not want to go to them only with problems. There should be contact not only when people have a problem with their legal status, for example. It is a two-way thing. There will be fun activities—if you see such activities in the paper and attend, even if you are not invited, most people will welcome you, unless there are religious or cultural reasons why you cannot attend. A lot can be achieved when you are in a relaxed situation and you are trying food from various ethnic backgrounds.

**Ron Skinner:** I am an expert on disability—my own—but I have to consult a range of people with different disabilities before I can give informed comment on the complete range of disabilities.

**Mrs Milne:** Kemi, I am from Aberdeen as well, so I may well take you up on your open invitation.

My questions are on barriers to participation. In its submission, Engender says that

"Lack of confidence and lack of encouragement to apply have also been identified in a number of studies as barriers"

to women's participation in local government. Do you believe that that applies equally to other under-represented groups?

**Kemi Adebayo:** I would definitely go with that. My experience is that, if I had not been encouraged, I would not have done what I have done, although I would have kept talking about things. There needs to be encouragement: we need some kind of mentor or buddy system. The situation applies not only to women, but to the minority ethnic communities. It is not necessary for the mentors to come from an ethnic minority background; people from the wider community could become mentors and encourage members of ethnic minority communities to participate in local government.

**Rami Ousta:** Lack of confidence is a major factor. However, that applies more generally to communities and not to women who are politically oriented or who belong to a political party in which they have been involved in various activities. Lack of confidence does not come about for no reason; it is probably the result of the social setting to which ethnic minority women have been subjected.

We always have to look into the cultural and religious complexities of a situation. Why does a man from the ethnic minorities have the ability to establish great networks with the community and yet women do not have the freedom to do that? Often, men in ethnic minority communities have greater confidence.

It would make a difference if support was given to women from those communities, especially if the women knew that that support came not only from one or two individuals in the community, but from a body such as a local authority or the Government or through the electoral process. As I said, we should encourage such groups of people by involving them in capacity-building courses. It would be good to do that, regardless of whether they become future candidates or go into politics.

**Ron Skinner:** Again, I make mention of disability in relation to confidence. Lack of confidence often stems from the disability itself and is often to do with the extent of the person's disability rather than with the background of the decisions that are taken for the disabled person by someone else—a partner, wife or a family member, for example. That issue needs to be recognised.

**Mrs Milne:** You might be aware that the Kerley report recommended that COSLA and representatives from the ethnic minority communities should draw up an action plan to encourage increased participation in councils by people from those communities. Are you aware of the progress that has been made on the issue?

**Rami Ousta:** No. I find it amazing that something is being developed at that level and that the Black and Ethnic Minority Infrastructure in



Scotland does not find out about it. The reason why our organisation was created and funded by the Scottish Executive was to address the lack of support for the black and ethnic minority communities and the voluntary sector in general. We were not aware of that development until now.

**Kemi Adebayo:** I am not aware of it.

**Ron Skinner:** Certainly, in my area of Forth valley—and the Stirling area in particular—black and ethnic groups are well represented in working groups that meet with the council. Things seem to be working fairly well there. I cannot say that the same necessarily applies to disability.

**Mrs Milne:** The situation is obviously patchy.

In her submission to the committee, Dr Fiona Mackay suggested:

“Political parties and local authorities should be encouraged or required to undertake a review of the potential barriers to the full participation of women, minority ethnic communities, disabled people and others in political life”.

What are your views on that suggestion? Do you believe that local authorities and political parties should produce action plans on the issues under discussion?

**Rami Ousta:** That is essential if we want to fulfil the intentions of the bill. I repeat that any such action plan—or any action group—has to open up to all communities, by which I mean our diverse communities. Politicians should give communities a chance, rather than doing things through gatekeepers, whether they be small local projects or individuals. Any action plan should not be restricted to a discussion with the few; it should be opened up to the whole community, so that everyone can have a say.

The political parties have tried to clean up their act in trying to encourage people from ethnic minorities to become councillors. In situations in which people are failing our communities and failing councils, we should, rather than allocate people just for the sake of it, encourage and invest in training and involve people who can provide something for us. Some groups will say that there is a language barrier for people from the ethnic minorities, but there is not. Anyone who is prepared to work at that level and to support communities should have the language skills to do so.

12:30

**Kemi Adebayo:** There are a lot of action points and recommendations, but are they being acted on? Who monitors whether they are implemented? In Aberdeen, we have been talking about consulting people in the city about issues and needs, but I am aware that a lot of research has

been done and a lot of recommendations have been made on which nobody has acted. There are actions points and recommendations, but they are just gathering dust, so who is making sure that they are acted on?

It might be a different ball game here, but Aberdeen City Council has invested, through various voluntary organisations, in research on some of the things about which we are talking and recommendations have been made, but nothing has moved on, although some of those recommendations were made 10 years ago. Multi Ethnic Aberdeen Ltd is doing an audit of all the research reports that have been done, even those that were done by the universities, to find out what was recommended and ask why nobody has acted on those recommendations. We hope that things will move on because of the audit.

**Mrs Milne:** There is always a risk of perpetual consultation and nobody biting the bullet and taking a decision. I agree on that.

**Ron Skinner:** Nevertheless, examples of good practice exist. I will cite one from the health service in my area, which is Forth valley. There are issues surrounding service delivery to people who are affected by disability, which obviously includes carers and families. In the Forth valley area, we have been able to get the three local councils—Clackmannanshire Council, Stirling Council and Falkirk Council—and the health service to draw up a strategy for the development of services for people who are disabled. The strategy has been completed, but it has not been put on the shelf to gather dust. A monitoring group has been set up and the strategy is monitored by individuals who were not part of the original strategy group. Those individuals are drawn from the three councils, the NHS in Forth valley and users so that the community is involved as well. That approach is working well. That is an example of good practice. One of the difficulties that we find is that there are examples of good practice elsewhere in Scotland, but nobody knows about them. We need to publicise good practice wherever possible.

**Mrs Milne:** That is right. There must be some sort of mechanism by which good practice can be shared and taken up in other areas.

**Ron Skinner:** The internet and websites are the best vehicle for that.

**The Convener:** I thank the witnesses for their evidence. We will submit a report to the Local Government and Transport Committee, but I expect that we will want to return to the issue, so Rami Ousta might have an opportunity to come back and share some of his great ideas.

**Ron Skinner:** I thank the committee and its officials for making the necessary arrangements

for me to be here today. You have been courteous and the experience has been pleasant.

**The Convener:** Thank you very much.

## Petition

### Care Homes (PE522)

12:34

**The Convener:** Agenda item 2 concerns petition PE522. Committee members have received an approach paper on the petition. Are there any comments? Do members agree that we should accept the referral from the Public Petitions Committee and carry out further consideration of the issues that the petition raises? Elaine Smith looks puzzled.

**Elaine Smith:** That is because the responses from the Executive and COSLA seem to make it clear that responsibility for the provision of services lies with local authorities. I am not sure how we would take the matter forward. Would we consider taking evidence from local authorities, for example?

**The Convener:** The proposal is that we ask the Executive for its view before we take the work forward. There appears to be a problem throughout the country with care for young disabled people and the issue of institutional care arises. I think that it would be worth writing to the Executive, but the committee might want to ask a reporter to consider the issue or we could take evidence on it.

**Mrs Milne:** The issue is not only about general care of young people in inappropriate settings. In speaking to individuals and groups, I am picking up on a significant problem with respite care. The facilities that are available to young people are in totally inappropriate settings.

**Shiona Baird:** From conversations that I have had with councils, it seems to me that there is a credibility gap—if that is the right way of expressing it—between the demands that the Executive makes of councils and the councils' ability to fulfil them. I include personal care as part of that problem and I think that it might be useful to consider whether the Executive's demands are feasible. I have just heard about two cases of bedblocking that have occurred simply because there is a huge waiting list for long-term care. There are no beds available. Perhaps that is stretching the boundaries a wee bit, but—

**The Convener:** We are talking about the care of young disabled people, whether that is respite care or longer-term care. Young people often find themselves in a ward or a home with older people who have a host of different problems. We are talking about care that is specifically for young people.

**Shiona Baird:** The question is whether carers are available so that young people can be cared for in a home situation.

**The Convener:** There is lots to discuss on the issue. Do members agree that, in the first instance, we should write to the Executive and ask a reporter to consider the issue? As Elaine Smith said, this might be an opportunity for us to consider evidence and to carry out some kind of inquiry. Although the issue does not affect many young people, there are certainly problems with care and respite care for young disabled people.

**Mrs Milne:** The issue is not just about councils; it goes right across the voluntary and private care sectors.

**The Convener:** Do members agree to what I have suggested?

**Members** *indicated agreement.*

**The Convener:** Thank you.

*Meeting closed at 12:38.*



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