EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE

Tuesday 24 February 2004
(*Morning*)

Session 2

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EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE

4th 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:

Ms Margaret Curran (Minister for Communities)
Yvonne Strachan (Scottish Executive Development Department)
David Thomson (Scottish Executive Development Department)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Steve Farrell

SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

Ruth Cooper

ASSISTANT CLERK

Roy McMahon

LOCATION

The Chamber

Scottish Parliament

Equal Opportunities Committee

Tuesday 24 February 2004

(*Morning*)

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

Items in Private

The Convener (Cathy Peattie): Good morning. Welcome to the Equal Opportunities Committee's fourth meeting in 2004. We have received no apologies.

Agenda item 3 is on a draft report that has not yet been signed off by the committee, and item 4 is on a draft paper on the committee's work programme. Do members agree to take items 3 and 4 in private?

Members *indicated agreement*.

European Year of Disabled People

10:02

The Convener: I welcome Margaret Curran, Minister for Communities, and Yvonne Strachan and David Thomson from the Scottish Executive equality unit. We have invited them along this morning to give the committee an opportunity to consider the European year of disabled people and to get their views on how successful, or otherwise, it was. I give the minister the opportunity to speak to us for a few minutes before we move on to questions.

The Minister for Communities (Ms Margaret Curran): Thank you, convener. I will be brief, as I know you would expect. I begin by thanking the committee for the invitation to be here this morning. I welcome the committee's interest in the European year of disabled people and in disability issues more broadly. I am sure that we will continue to discuss such issues in the coming period.

We think that the European year of disabled people was very successful and that it has had a significant and, I hope, lasting impact in promoting the agenda around disability. Several things have emerged around it: it has encouraged debate about disability issues in Scotland; it has provided a focus for work on disability; and it has stimulated ideas about how we should continue that work.

The underlying principle behind all our work in relation to the European year of disabled people has been partnership working—the success that we have had came about because of that. We established a Scottish steering group of disability organisations along with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, the Scottish Trades Union Congress, the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations and others. The group developed a work plan of activities to promote the year and the Executive set aside £200,000 to fund those activities. A variety of organisations in the disability sector came together and worked together effectively—traditionally, that has not always been the case, so the work was about creating a new partnership environment. That work has also provided a helpful focus for networking and joint working between organisations. Through partnership, we delivered events, initiatives and projects that have promoted disabled people's rights and participation.

The year provided a launch pad for taking forward work with disabled people and for new ways of working. I hope that we and others can begin to consider disability in new ways and, as I and the convener have always argued, to bring it into the mainstream of what we do. Consideration of disability issues should not be an add-on, such as a special event that is held so that people can tick the box that is associated with disability activities. We must mainstream our efforts in the variety of work that we do. For example, Scottish Enterprise and Careers Scotland have a new focus on supporting disabled people who want to start their own businesses. In April, the STUC debated disability issues as part of its mainstreaming agenda, and I am pleased to say that Arts & Business Scotland has launched a new scheme for disability arts with additional funding from the Scottish Executive.

The Executive has also been working with grass-roots disability organisations to consider how best to develop policy in partnership with them. In 2003, we provided £250,000 to two national disability organisations to help us with that work, and we will continue that support in the coming year. Our policy development increasingly involves disabled people from the outset, as the committee often insists that it should. The Scottish Executive Justice Department is doing work on hate crimes and it has engaged with disability organisations from the outset in developing that consultation.

If the committee will bear with me, there are a couple of key points that I want to make—I know that I am being a bit cheeky by going on a bit. For us, the European year of disabled people has provided a sharp focus on the work on disability that we are doing. Before members ask, let me tell the committee that we want to sustain and build on that work in the coming year. At this committee meeting today, I am announcing £1 million of funding to help to promote disability equality over the coming years. That includes £500,000 to support and build capacity across Scotland's network of local access panels, which we regard as very significant; £200,000 for a national initiative to promote employment for young disabled people; £200,000 to promote access to information and communications technology for disabled people; and £80,000 for the grass-roots disability organisation Inclusion Scotland so that it can further develop local capacity and help the Executive to engage with disabled people. I am happy to furnish the committee with any details that it wants about that announcement.

The funding package relates directly to the messages that are associated with the EYDP, such as the need to support young people and local groups and the need to focus on mainstreaming. One of the key lessons of the year is the need to take a strategic approach to disability issues throughout the Executive. Shortly, we will publish a report to highlight the lessons that we have learned; we will look back at the year's successes and failures and consider the things that we could have done a bit better. A disability working group will then be established to consider the report and to come up with recommendations for future action. We will announce the group's remit and membership in the spring, when we have concluded the report. We intend to host a large grass-roots event for disabled people in 2005 to ensure that our strategic approach can properly be linked to the engagement process.

I hope that I have indicated that the Executive has made a strong commitment to the European year of disabled people. We would not say that everything was perfect and we will happily discuss the lessons that can be learned, but we used the year to further our commitment to working with disabled people and to take that commitment into the coming years.

The Convener: Thank you for making your announcement at this committee meeting. I dare say that some members will want to ask you questions about it, and we would welcome a paper with wider information on it.

You will recall that when the previous Equal Opportunities Committee considered the European year of disabled people, it decided to hold a participation event at the start of the year and another at the end of the year, because members thought that it was important to consider where the year's events had gone—that is the area that I want to focus on in my questions. Do you think that the year's events increased the level of debate on disability? What difference, if any, has the year made to people's lives?

Ms Curran: The question can be answered in two parts. I will deal first with the work that the Executive contributed and secondly with the broader Scottish reaction to the year. I do not know whether we have any research on the matter or whether we can count figures and name names, but I would certainly like to think that we have facilitated greater participation. We have worked with all the organisations whose work relates to the issues that we have focused on, and we have certainly engaged directly with more disabled people. I do not know whether the numbers have increased, but I imagine that they have. As I understand it, we also encouraged those organisations to consult their memberships about the work that we do. We have hosted events, initiatives and conferences, but there has been a range of other participation events below that.

It could therefore be argued that the year led to greater participation—certainly, it led to greater participation in policy making. The announcement that I have made today is the direct result of that experience. For example, we now have a sharp understanding that access panels are significant in tackling some big access issues. It could therefore also be argued that the level of participation has helped.

There has certainly been much broader discussion about disability, which gives me a better lever with which to argue to other Executive departments that they should focus on disability issues and that such issues should be part of the mainstream agenda. I am sure that the people who are dealing with hate crimes would have consulted disability organisations in any event, but such discussions help to ensure that disability issues are a more consistent part of the mainstream agenda. That work has been notable.

That said, although we have had a debate about disability issues, it should be acknowledged that perhaps the debate in Scotland has not been as broad as it could have been. If we are to learn one lesson, it would be not to pack our bags and go away as though we have done disability and have had the debate. We must use the debate as an agenda to go forward. I will be brutally honest: at the start of the year, I expected more of a public debate than there has been. We produced a special flyer—or whatever the technical term is—for *The Sun* at the beginning of the year, I think, that I thought would have stimulated a wee bit more public or media discussion, but that has not happened to the extent that we wished.

Furthermore, there is a need for continuing analysis of and debate about the complexity and range of disability issues, because there is still a stereotyped and limited view of disability. People can think that disability is covered simply by a poster of a person in a wheelchair, but we all know that disability is much more than that. We must take the debate forward.

The Convener: I would be interested in any feedback from local projects and organisations that were funded to do work during the EYDP on levels of participation and on issues that people raised during the year. Early on, some people said that that they had heard about the European year of disabled people and some people with disabilities were aware of it, but there was a view that it related to people in wheelchairs and had nothing to do with them. If it is available, feedback from projects on levels of participation might be interesting.

Ms Curran: I ask David Thomson to say something about that, as he has done the work at the official level on that matter.

David Thomson (Scottish Executive Development Department): Scotland received a significant level of funding from the Department for Work and Pensions, which has funded a number of projects. We asked all the organisations to tell us about their experiences and a number of them have done so. That feedback seemed to indicate that a large amount of work was being done at a local level, but that such work is geographically spread. Work was being done on a project in Inverness, for example.

More widely, there was a Disability Rights Commission conference last Monday—450 people attended it, so they were obviously interested in disability issues. A strong message came from the conference, and the issues that arose included access panel work and the need for strong disability organisations at a local level to engage with local authorities, the local press and small and medium-sized enterprises. There is a lot of work and awareness out there, but a case can always be made for stronger local disability organisations.

The Convener: Minister, you have heard me say that it is important that work is done at the grass roots and that, if the infrastructure is not right at grass-roots level, it is difficult to ensure wide participation or, indeed, an understanding of people's needs. Earlier, you announced welcome money that will be made available. How much of that money will go into building networks at local level? If money is available to do so, what measures will be put in place to ensure that the money that is made available works and—forgive me for saying this—that it is not money for lip-service work with poor people, but will mean something to people with disabilities?

10:15

Ms Curran: Yvonne Strachan will discuss the details, but I absolutely accept the principle behind what you say. However, funding is not the only way in which we can support infrastructure, grass-roots organisations and the provision of disability information. Other work is continuing, which Yvonne Strachan will discuss.

There is no point in simply paying lip service—an announcement could be made that does not pay off and there could be no return on it if things are not done properly. It is important that we go with the grain of disability organisations' work, which is why we have worked so closely with them. We must work with people who have experience of the issues and who can guide us through to the solutions that are required rather than simply sit in an ivory tower, coming out with solutions and imposing them on groups. However, you and I know that working with them is easier said than done. There is a range of issues and organisations. Even the geography of Scotland means that work must be done in different locations, but we are certainly making efforts to address such issues.

Yvonne Strachan (Scottish Executive Development Department): I would like to add three things to what the minister has said. First, some of the disability organisations are national charities and have extensive networks and memberships. In their participation in the European year of disabled people, although they have been represented by individuals on the steering group, those organisations have always emphasised that anything that they have done has been worked through with their memberships in their own communities in a way that engages disabled people in their own communities.

Secondly, we have funded two organisations for or of disabled people that are led by disabled people. We have been keen to ensure that the balance between disability charities and charities that deal with disability issues has been complemented by support for disabled people and by their own organisational autonomy.

Thirdly, the minister referred to access panels, which are very much directed at local communities to ensure that there is support and advice from disabled people to institutions that are responsible for dealing with access issues in local communities in order to improve the lot of communities not only for the disabled people in them, but for communities as a whole. That is why the direction of funds through access panels was seen as important. There is a definite thread through all the funding proposals that recognises the need for local community engagement.

Shiona Baird (North East Scotland) (Green): My questions are about young people. I was thinking about the money that has been announced today and how it would be allocated. I think that you have specifically allocated £200,000 for issues relating to young disabled people, which I welcome. My first question relates to involving young disabled people in the decision-making process. I was mulling over the fact that many people feel totally disengaged from the structures of society. Can you say how will you spend the money to ensure that young people are fully engaged in the decision-making process?

Ms Curran: Fully engaging young people is a tall order and, to be frank, we are nowhere near doing so—a lot of work must be done on that. We are only beginning to understand the engagement of disabled people more broadly and we need to appreciate the strands of experience relating to young people.

There are many levels, one of which is trying to understand disabled young people and trying to facilitate having a straight conversation with them. We have done work with Barnardo’s on a national conference to strengthen the participation of young disabled people and we have also done work with dialogue youth—through Young Scot, I think—to try to facilitate greater involvement of young disabled people and to hear about their issues in order to develop agendas.

Work in schools is another level. We are supporting Playback to produce a video and resource pack on disability, which will be distributed to all secondary schools in Scotland along with associated training materials. Work on transitions into further education and employment must also be properly addressed. We understand that there are huge barriers and that young disabled people simply do not have the opportunities that are available to others. There are specific things that we need to do in relation to those barriers. I ask David Thomson to say something about that, as some of our money is for that purpose.

David Thomson: The £200,000 funding that was announced today will go to the Disability and Rehabilitation Education Foundation, for its TISEE project—I have forgotten what the acronym stands for. The DARE Foundation will support a project to build partnerships with young disabled people, education providers, school staff and employers. The project will provide education providers and employers with a forum to develop sustainable collaborative strategies that will allow young disabled people the opportunity to make informed career choices. Over the next three years, funding will go directly to that project.

Ms Curran: I will come at the question from a different angle. I want to address the other side of the issue that the convener raised—ensuring that our mainstream work on youth takes into account disability issues. We must ensure that our colleagues in the Education Department and the Enterprise, Transport and Lifelong Learning Department do that work. The issue is also relevant to some of the work that I do in other parts of my portfolio. That applies to housing—ensuring that people have housing opportunities—and, in particular, to youth work and supported projects that are targeted at young people under social inclusion partnership programmes. We are making progress on that, but there is more to be made to ensure that people think through disability issues when they do youth or education work. We must come at the issue from two angles.

Shiona Baird: Integrating young disabled children into the mainstream is very important. You have not commented specifically on plans or programmes to do that. Do you have any such programmes in mind?

Ms Curran: In what sense?

Shiona Baird: In the sense of involving disabled children and young people in mainstream society and education—the whole business of integrating them.

Ms Curran: The Executive has undertaken a programme that relates to integration in the broad sense. Legislation has been enacted in this area and work is being done in schools. Off the top of my head, I cannot provide details of that work, because it belongs to a different portfolio, but I can obtain those details for the committee. In relation to equality, there must be specific programmes to involve young disabled people. During the year, we have done some work in that area, but we may need to consider continuing it, to ensure that young people are involved in all the other participation events.

Shiona Baird: That is very important.

Ms Curran: We can write to the committee with reassurances about that.

Shiona Baird: I want to ask about the role of the children's commissioner. Is it part of the commissioner's remit to deal with children with disabilities?

Ms Curran: I would think so, but I will have to check that specifically. The convener is nodding furiously at me.

The Convener: I should not answer a question that has been addressed to the minister, but the role of the commissioner is to represent and work on behalf of all children living in Scotland, regardless of who they are and where they come from.

Ms Curran: I am not sure how the specific issue that Shiona Baird raises is written into the commissioner's remit, but I will check that.

Shiona Baird: We know that problems exist, but we need to identify them specifically so that we can address them.

Ms Curran: I imagine that the issue that Shiona Baird raises is addressed in the commissioner's remit, but I will double-check that.

The Convener: You speak about ensuring that young people have opportunities, job advice, training advice and so on. That is very sound, but sometimes the biggest barrier to young people with disabilities is the advice that they receive and the awareness and understanding of the youth workers, teachers and advisers with whom they work. If someone has a disability, they will go to a day centre and that will be that. What discussion is under way to ensure that the people to whom I refer have appropriate training so that they can give appropriate advice to young people?

Ms Curran: You make a significant point. Guidance teachers and Careers Scotland are responsible for ensuring that they address all appropriate equality issues. We have talked about the guidance that the Executive issues. I do not think that the issue of clarity of advice concerning disabled young people's career opportunities is addressed specifically in guidance. Perhaps we should examine that, to ensure that there is explicit encouragement to raise standards. You are hinting that standards in this area are not high enough. The work that we are doing with teachers, Careers Scotland and Scottish Enterprise should be pursued. I can come back to the committee on that issue, to ensure that we pursue it actively.

The Convener: We are interested in that strand of work and what it involves.

Mrs Nanette Milne (North East Scotland) (Con): My first question is in two parts. The first relates to young adults and the second relates to younger people who are still children.

In December we took evidence from Marion Fletcher from Donaldson's College, who spoke of difficulties that young people and adults with severe speech, language and communication problems have. There is a lack of professionals with the expertise and understanding to address their general needs in life. I refer to social work, housing, employment and so on. Does the Executive have plans to increase the understanding that people who work in areas such as housing and social work have of those needs?

I have come into close contact with young children with special needs, who have difficulty accessing professionals such as associated health professionals—physiotherapists, occupational therapists and speech therapists, in particular. You will recall that just before Christmas there was a members' business debate that highlighted the issue. Such professionals are scarce not just in the north-east, but throughout Scotland. How can the problem be remedied? The situation throughout the country is serious.

Ms Curran: We now understand that for people to be integrated fully into society, they need services that facilitate that. The social model of disability suggests that the problem is not with disabled people but with the services that are available, which do not assist them. I accept absolutely the primary point that Nanette Milne is making.

The witness from Donaldson's College raised the issue of the specific needs of people with different disabilities and how services respond to them. General work is being done in relation to the sensitivity of mainstream staff, to ensure that they understand that their client group is varied and that it is necessary to focus particularly on the needs of disabled people. General disability training does not necessarily make someone sensitive to the needs of a person who has profound hearing issues. People cannot assume that familiarity with one disability will provide them with a proper insight into another. Specific supports are required to deal with those issues.

In a very general sense, social work and housing departments are responsible for ensuring that the needs of specific client or service groups are met. In housing, a variety of measures could be taken to support people with a given disability. Housing support services are likely to be physical. Support could be provided through building standards, for example. In social work services, the focus would be much more on enabling people to access the particular service that was required. I am not sure whether Nanette Milne was asking about British Sign Language—perhaps we will return to that issue. There are specific things that we need to do to meet the needs of particular groups.

Nanette Milne also raised the issue of speech therapists. I will need to check with the Health Department, which has specific responsibility for the matter, and come back to the committee with information about the progress that has been made. I understand the point that she makes about the need to have services in place.

Mrs Milne: There is probably overlap between your remit and that of the Minister for Health and Community Care.

Ms Curran: There is.

Mrs Milne: Under the agenda for change, there is a perception—if not a reality—that professionals are being offered different terms and conditions. Therapists feel that they may be getting a raw deal compared with other people. Something needs to be sorted out in that area.

Ms Curran: I take seriously the point that Nanette Milne makes. There is an overlap between my portfolio and those of other ministers. My equality interests allow me to engage with colleagues about the need to deal with inequalities that are not being addressed. I will pursue the issue that she has raised and come back to the committee on it.

Mrs Milne: My second question relates to disabled students in further and higher education and disparities between their experiences. We took evidence from two students who had completely different experiences: one had been helped significantly at the college that she attended, but the other—a visually impaired student—had difficulty even in getting things such as a talking computer at university.

I declare an interest as a governor of the University of Aberdeen, which has done tremendous work on its physical structure in order to improve access for disabled students of all types. However, there is disparity throughout the country in access for disabled students. Is the Executive doing anything to encourage support for disabled students that is consistent throughout Scotland?

10:30

Ms Curran: Yes, we are addressing that key issue and, like Nanette Milne, we acknowledge that certain institutions have done good work. The lesson from such work is that when an institution gets a grip of the issues, it can make a significant difference. We require institutions to get a grip of disabled access issues. Legislation has been making institutions do certain things and further legislation will make institutions do more. One reason why I support the inclusion in bills of sections on equality—although we all know that that is not the grand solution to everything—is that they provide levers to ensure that disability issues are addressed.

I want to inform members about a couple of things that the Executive is doing to address disparity. The Scottish Further Education Funding Council has invested substantial funding in supporting colleges on disability issues. In 2002, £20 million was provided to the further education sector: a £10 million grant for technical equipment and aids to support teaching and £10 million to address urgent building infrastructure needs and to support accessibility improvements under disability legislation. Much of the work has, inevitably, been about physical access; for example, toilet facilities, lifts and ramps. Therefore, much investment is being made on physical access because we know that heavy costs are associated with such work.

On 24 November 2003, colleges were, for consultation, issued with draft guidance on arrangements for supporting students with disabilities where partnership with other agencies is required. The consultation closes at the end of February. There will be consultation events, which will perhaps be the next stage for dealing with disparity. Organisations have produced a variety of development programmes, which we will perhaps discuss further during our consideration of the consultation.

Marilyn Livingstone (Kirkcaldy) (Lab): I am the committee's reporter on disability issues. Ruth Cooper, a committee clerk, and I were in Inverness yesterday speaking to different disability groups. I thank the Highland group for its hospitality. We think that it will be good to have another such session on 8 March, which will not be a formal session—the clerk and I will speak to people and user groups on the ground. I will report fully to the committee in March on our findings from yesterday's meeting. However, people raised the issue of awareness, particularly about what disabled people's rights were and what they could expect.

We met people who have mental health issues and people who have learning disabilities. We also met two mothers of multiply disabled young people. One of the youngsters was seven, I think, and was blind and deaf. What came out was that people felt that they still had to fight in relation to issues around disability. One of the mothers to whom we spoke said—if I remember correctly—that hearing and sight issues were automatically mainstreamed and that her child could get access to what she needed, but that it is a fight to get facilities for other disabilities—for example, the mother had to fight to get a specialised buggy. The social justice issue for me is that is there is no problem about getting access to mainstreamed services, but there is a problem in getting access to certain disability facilities.

One of the things that I took away from yesterday's meeting is that people feel that they have constantly to fight different organisations that are not speaking to each other. People feel that the work of many voluntary groups is good, but they are worried about its sustainability. People also raised the issue of access to professionals. We were told that many people move to Inverness because services exist there. We heard of people in the Highlands and Islands who had lived great distances from Inverness, but who had moved there. For example, we met a young guy who had moved to Inverness from Fort William to get the best services. We will go back and speak to people in different areas in the Highlands to find out what the situation is.

On employability, many people, especially those with mental health problems and learning disabilities, feel that they can easily get into the training cycle; however, they feel that it is difficult to break out of that cycle and into employment, which is frustrating for them. What I have said so far represents background information from the meeting that Ruth Copper and I attended yesterday. However, we were given copies of many reports on the situation in the Highlands—I can make them available to the minister, if she wants them.

The main point that came from the meeting was that people feel that there is much good will from the Executive. However, as the convener asked, how much of that filters down to service users? There are still barriers to a mainstreamed approach, so what plans does the Executive have for ensuring that, for example, the agenda for change will impact on local users? What work will the Executive do with businesses to improve their awareness and understanding of disabled people's legal requirements and needs as employees and, indeed, as customers?

Ms Curran: Is that all?

Marilyn Livingstone: Yes, that is all.

Ms Curran: There was quite a lot in that.

Marilyn Livingstone: I am sorry.

Ms Curran: That was a comprehensive set of questions. We would be interested to hear the evidence that Marilyn Livingstone has, especially from service users and disabled people and their families about the challenges that they face, because it concern us that people still face such profound challenges. Some of the solution is to improve service delivery, some of it is about improving the Executive's work and some of it is about improving the work of the broad spectrum of stakeholders in Scotland.

To be honest, I have not thought particularly about specialist buggies, to which Marilyn Livingstone referred. I do not know anything about the manufacture of buggies for children who have disabilities, but being unable to get such equipment must be a central experience for people. Perhaps we should encourage a dialogue with the private sector about such issues. I think that we are beginning to do that because of the requirements of disability legislation, but perhaps we need to develop that.

On the employability of young disabled people and their transition into work from training, some of the problems that they face involve straightforward prejudice and discrimination. However, the problem is also partly about ICT. If a company or organisation does not have proper information technology facilities, that can inhibit its employment of disabled people. However, such bodies' having IT facilities can transform the situation.

Some of the problems are about matters in respect of institutional situations that we just have not got right yet; for example, links with education and standards of career guidance. Business acknowledges that there is a need to focus on that area. I have conversations with bodies such as Scottish Business in the Community and I am sure that we can progress matters in such conversations.

As I said, investment is being made in encouraging disabled people who want to start their own businesses. There is a significant raft of employability issues across the board for people who do not have access to proper employment opportunities. Disability is a key strand in that and the Executive wants to take up that issue more broadly within the "Better communities in Scotland: Closing the gap" agenda.

The other two big points that Marilyn Livingstone raised—which, I suppose, are linked—were about awareness raising and the need to get services properly attuned to front-line users. It is all very grand having a great policy, but it must have a genuine impact on the ground. In the Executive, much more effort has gone into considering the outcomes of spending, as opposed to considering simply the amount of spending. I have been guilty of the latter, as Shiona Baird properly pointed out. We sometimes announce the money that we will spend, rather than what we think the money will achieve. The amount of money is obviously important, but we must alter our mindset and ensure that our announcements say what we will do.

The voluntary sector is an increasingly important provider of services—it is attuned to particular needs. Yesterday, I was at the voluntary sector gathering event. I cannot remember the statistics off the top of my head, but the sector will continue to grow, especially within community care services. Our strategic review of funding of the voluntary sector must address sustainability because of that sector's vital role. The sector represents disability interests and provides a service for people. It articulates the agenda and tries to represent the experiences of people who have particular service requirements. People need their issues to be understood in the debate, as the convener suggested. A lot of work has to be done in supporting the voluntary sector, so we will be interested in what the committee has to say as its investigations continue. Substantial points will be made that will go to the heart of the Executive's work on service delivery and on meeting the needs of the most vulnerable people. I accept that I have given only a partial answer, but I am sure that the discussion will continue in the coming months.

Marilyn Livingstone: I thank the minister for her answer, which was the answer that I wanted to hear. I am pleased to hear her speak of the importance of the voluntary sector, which has come over loud and clear. Sustainability is important if good projects are helping people.

Care paths can be complex and we have heard about people trying to use direct payments to ensure that respite is available. I want to make one last point while I have the chance. If someone has a progressive disability, how can we ensure a good care path for them? I am thinking about multiple sclerosis in particular. How can we meet people's changing needs without their having continually to fight for help? How can we sustain services for them as their disabilities progress? We have to raise awareness among professionals about such needs.

Ms Curran: As Nanette Milne said, standards are different. When practice is good, it can be very good: we should make that the norm rather than have only some practices with excellent standards. We should be able to offer good support to people who have progressive illnesses.

Marilyn Livingstone: I am bringing up the negatives, but we have seen many examples of good practice and we have met many very dedicated people. I want to put that on the record.

Ms Curran: I agree—we should give credit to the people who do incredible work in this field.

Elaine Smith (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab): The minister said in her opening statement that the European year of disabled people was about much more than posters of wheelchair users. That is clearly true.

10:45

I want to ask about an underlying issue that we have heard about in evidence, which may take us into the role of the Minister for Communities. The issue is that of poverty in families who have a disabled child or disabled children. I mean not only poverty of income—important though that is—but poverty of choice, of opportunity and of voice. The committee heard evidence from Capability Scotland and Barnardo's which highlighted problems that often result in families living in poverty. Capability Scotland reported that households with disabled children are among the poorest in Scotland in income terms and that nearly half of carers of disabled children are not in work, compared with the national unemployment rate of under 8 per cent. Capability Scotland said:

> "mainstream childcare provision is often unable to accommodate disabled children",

and it said that there are additional costs of travel for treatment and of specialised equipment.

Barnardo's said:

> "It can cost three times as much to raise a child with a disability as it costs to raise a child without a disability. A family with a disabled child is less likely to be in work, and Government policies make work the route out of poverty."—[*Official Report, Equal Opportunities Committee,* 31 January 2003; c 1738.]

Issues arise such as the lack of suitable child care provision, the cost of specialised equipment and other services, and the problems of obtaining suitable employment. Some of those problems have been mentioned in questions from my colleagues.

I note in the minister's announcement that there will be £200,000 to tackle unemployment among young people who have disabilities. What plans does she have to tackle issues that affect specifically families with disabled children?

Ms Curran: Again, that question raised a range of issues. I have looked at some of the research that the committee has seen. Evidence on the relationships between poverty, ill health and disability is significant—we will have to address that as part of the communities portfolio.

Yvonne Strachan may want to comment on how the work that we have announced today can relate easily to work with families, but I want first to make two specific points, the first of which is to do with child care. It is well established that the cost of child care support for families who have disabled children is significantly higher than for other families. I draw members' attention to child care moneys that I announced some time last year—£20 million—to look into specialised child care interventions: disability was one of the themes.

Our child care strategy covers a number of ministers, and local authorities have child care strategies, which are very good. I would argue strongly for them, saying that the Executive has done a fabulous job and that it is great stuff. However, the strategies were not targeted quite well enough at people with very particular needs, a disproportionate number of whom were among the poorest and showed up in the poverty figures, which was partly related to women doing part time and out-of-hours work. They comprise a key group whose needs have to be addressed. Their hours can change from week to week and there is not a lot of child care around at weekends. We also have to consider disabled children and rural issues because their difficulties are compounded in rural areas.

There is £20 million in my budget for social justice child care, if you like. It is specifically designed to address such needs. We have run successful pilots and rolled out initiatives not only on disability but on a variety of other needs. Those schemes will help us to understand the need to provide and develop specialised child care support. There may be specialised spend or broader spend within child care, which will affect issues such as those which Elaine Smith mentioned. She was right to talk about poverty of choice and opportunity as well as of income. Barnardo's and others have spoken about those issues.

Employability is another issue. We need to stretch our understanding of what we mean by access to work. I argue—although I am sure that Nanette Milne would disagree—that the Labour Government has been very successful in getting people into work and in tackling unemployment. However, a group of people are not effectively accessing those opportunities and we have to focus on that group. Their route to opportunities is much longer. That might be because a person is homeless and needs to get a house and get themselves together. That can take a long time. People who have been homeless will not necessarily go down to the job centre and start work right away; they need support to do that. People who have addiction problems also need support.

I think that we understand now that there are people who have been disabled for some time but have not been supported by services during that time. Some disabled people have not been getting proper access to employment services in the broadest sense, for example. We need to stretch our understanding of the role of the services in order to support people back into work. We need to shift some of our thinking on that. We are at the beginning of that process, but we are making progress on that front, although not as quickly as people would want us to, perhaps.

Elaine Smith: It is welcome that the minister reminded us about the funding. I hope that the convener agrees that the committee would welcome the additional information that the minister proffered.

Ms Curran: Perhaps I could address the point about the money that we announced today, which is to provide support for young people during their transition into work. That would not necessarily exclude family support, but I will ask Yvonne Strachan to confirm whether that is the case.

Yvonne Strachan: The money is to build partnerships to enable the transition from school into work and to facilitate that transition. The project makes the links about which the minister spoke in relation to poverty. It is also to ensure that there is more support for disabled people in employment, so that more people are enabled to move out of poverty or at least to find a way forward.

In a sense, the project is part of a process; the issue must be tackled in a range of different ways. There is a need for support for families who have disabled children who are in poverty, and for disabled people themselves. As Elaine Smith rightly pointed out, such families and disabled people do not have equality of access to services and do not necessarily have the same levels of employability.

Elaine Smith: Perhaps we should take the issue a small step forward and address the question of suitable provision in cases of multiple discrimination. Problems can be exacerbated; for example, if a family is a single-parent family or a minority ethnic family. I thank the minister for making her welcome announcement of funding of £1 million. Will part of the money be directed towards plans or programmes that are aimed specifically at dealing with issues of multiple discrimination?

Ms Curran: That is an interesting question. Elaine Smith knows that the way in which the Executive is trying to develop the equality agenda is by recognising multiple discrimination and by getting away from the tick-box or shopping-list approach to the issue. We must ask: what have we done for elderly people? What have we done for women and so on? We have to understand the interconnections between different inequalities.

Elaine Smith rightly said that “Problems can be exacerbated”; indeed, the figures show that certain groups experience discrimination disproportionately. We want to encourage such analysis and to develop policy in the light of it. There is nothing to stop us developing a multi-discrimination base to our work. I am sure that some of the people on access panels might come from ethnic minority backgrounds—those communities must be properly represented. Gender issues also need to be understood.

The point is exactly the same as the one that was made about child care: if a person understands why child care is a barrier and has experienced what is it is like to have a buggy that does not work properly or that does not suit a child’s needs, they are much more likely to have a grasp of the issues and to be able to solve them much more effectively. The answer is yes in terms of theory, but perhaps we have a wee bit more to do in terms of practice.

Shiona Baird: I want to ask about how work can be used as a route out of poverty. Nanette Milne and I have spoken to parents of children who have disabilities. Those parents told us that they do not have the energy both to look after their children and to go out to work. Those are the people who are really poor. Other parents told us that they care so much about looking after their children that they do not want child care support; they want support to enable them to stay at home and be parents. That issue also needs to be addressed.

Ms Curran: A range of factors needs to be thought about in that discussion. There are people who will not work because they cannot work. Circumstances such as those that Shiona Baird described mean that it is inappropriate for parents to go to work, which is why there is extra support for people with disabilities—disability triggers extra benefits and different kinds of support. Although I am sure that we could argue about the nature of the benefits and how support is offered, it is proper that we recognise that work is not appropriate for some people.

In some ways, we are not talking about an either-or situation. Some time ago, the assumption that the welfare state made was that disabled people stayed at home and that they were cared for usually by their families, although the state increasingly took that on. We challenge the notion that disabled people are to be cared for, because disabled people can be workers and can participate in society. I know that Shiona Baird is not suggesting otherwise.

Shiona Baird: That is not what I was suggesting.

Ms Curran: We must, in relation to the issue—we are trying to do this with the child care moneys—say that although people might want to work, it might be only for a small number of hours. Although working for a couple of hours will not generate an income for a whole family, there should be opportunities for people to be a bit more flexible in their working lives.

There are also issues around development of proper services so that we can ensure that people have access to respite care. Although the point is not completely about work, the expectation should not be that the carer of a disabled person—the sort of woman that Shiona Baird described—will be the carer for ever and at all times. Other support has to be made available.

I accept that for some people work is not the immediate answer to the situation that they are in and I agree that proper services should be in place to support such people—the welfare state should support them. I think that that is what Shiona Baird was telling me to say.

Mrs Milne: I have a small point that relates to something that I said earlier about the need for understanding in social work services and so on. I want to mention an example, again from Aberdeenshire, that happened in a wood recycling unit that is staffed by people who have varying degrees of disabilities. The staff are not paid a wage, but are given a nominal amount for the therapeutic work that they do. However, one young man who had talked very proudly about his wage immediately had his benefit stopped. We managed to sort out the situation, but it illustrated the lack of understanding in the benefits office. That example shows that welfare or professional organisations not understanding the situation of disabled people can impact unfavourably on deserving people.

Ms Curran: Yes.

The Convener: That was a good point, which takes me back to what I said earlier about awareness. Problems often stem from the people who support disabled people, rather than from the person or young person who has the disability.

Margaret Smith (Edinburgh West) (LD): My question relates to funding issues. I want to pick up on a couple of things that the minister said. The draft budget says that the Executive will follow up on the European year of disabled people and that it will continue

> “to work … to promote the rights and participation of disabled people in society”.

At the beginning of your remarks today, you said that you will review the year of disabled people and report on what was done well, what happened on the ground and so on. You also said that the Executive will undertake a strategic review of the voluntary sector in relation to the sustainability of funding. The importance of the voluntary sector has been echoed by committee members today—indeed, it has also been echoed by you and your colleagues. What will the reviews entail? What areas does the Executive plan to target? Welcome though the announcements that you have made today are, will you indicate whether, on the back of those reviews, it is likely that the Executive will pick up on other issues in respect of extra funding?

Ms Curran: That is a significant point. In some ways, we feel that we are damned if we do and damned if we do not. Of course we should review the year, but sometimes when we say that we are reviewing things, people get frustrated. They can be a bit cynical and say, "Is that all the Executive does? All it does is review everything and produce reports." We are genuinely trying not to do only that.

I would like to say a few words about the strategic review of voluntary sector funding, which is an on-going review that is about to conclude. I can give the committee the documents that relate to the review, which is of significance across the Executive because we all relate to the voluntary sector.

We have had a partnership arrangement with SCVO and—to a certain extent—with COSLA to consider how we address some of the fundamental issues around voluntary sector funding. When the Executive was first established, we considered whether the voluntary sector was properly funded and moved to a three-year programme of funding, which made life in the sector a lot better, even if it did not resolve all the issues. There was a need to examine how voluntary organisations were funded. It is often local authorities that give out voluntary sector grants and people are still very frustrated about year-on-year funding. There are a number of aspects, some of which relate to the big national organisations, which are highly significant in the disability field, and some of which relate to local services and voluntary organisations. It is a question of how we stabilise the relationship and address some of the issues.

11:00

I am expecting to get that report soon. It is being carried out at arm's length from me, although our officials have been involved in it. I will come back to you on that. I take your point about the outcomes of reviews being more important than the reviews themselves.

On our review of the European year of disabled people, I think that there have been successes. That relates to the first point that the convener made. We have been quite focused on the year and have made progress but, to a certain extent, I do not think that the year has been public enough or has bitten in the way in which we would have wanted it to. We need to look back and understand that a bit more. Was that just a question of presentation or have we lost opportunities? There might well be recommendations that we want to develop.

I understand why committee members get frustrated when they hear about working groups. They are used to hearing about the Executive doing reviews, setting up working groups and producing recommendations but, in some ways, there is no other way to do it. I cannot get on and get the work done properly without finding the right balance. People have to pick up agendas, get round the table and give us expert advice so that we do not simply act on a whim. We are trying to strike a balance in getting working groups and the experts—by which I mean disabled people and their organisations—to work with us. That will allow us to pick up the frustrations that they might have had about the year, as well as some of the things that they think have worked well.

I know that your point is about money. The review will consider what we achieve with that.

Margaret Smith: The key point is to try to ensure that there are good, strong local organisations on the ground. David Thomson mentioned that they can engage with the local media; that would also raise awareness. Many of the voluntary sector organisations in the disability field have such a dual role. They act as advocates in that they deal with the problems in people's everyday lives, but they also provide services, so they are slightly unusual in comparison with some other voluntary sector organisations. We want to ensure that the funding that goes in hits those groups and those individuals.

I want to pick up on the amount of money that is being made available for ICT. What will it be used for?

Ms Curran: I am trying to find the right part of my briefing. David Thomson might be able to answer that.

Margaret Smith: Would you like me to ask you another question while you are looking for the relevant information?

Ms Curran: Thank you; that is very kind.

Margaret Smith: My next question is slightly related. You list the implementation of a new strategy for volunteering as one of your priorities in the draft budget. In December, Marion Findlay of the Volunteer Centre Edinburgh reported to the committee that the

> "incidence of people with disabilities being actively involved in volunteering is much lower than that for the population as a whole."

Will any part of the Executive's new strategy be aimed at reducing the barriers to disabled people's ability to participate in volunteering?

Ms Curran: We will have a revised emphasis on volunteering and the needs of disabled people will be addressed within that. We will focus on encouraging volunteering among disabled people by ensuring that they have the extra resources and specialised support that are required. I am hesitating, because that has not been announced yet.

Margaret Smith: We should watch that space.

Ms Curran: Yes.

Margaret Smith: I can ask you another question.

Ms Curran: You can ask me about ICT again, because I have found the answer. We are making available £206,000 to Lead Scotland for 2003-04 to raise awareness among disabled adults and their carers of the benefits of the internet; to provide 200 laptops on loan to enable disabled adults to access the internet at home and develop skills; to provide specialist assessment of accessible ICT; to provide support and confidence building through provision of access to the internet—I think that that is about the development of CD-ROMs—to provide information about local internet taster sessions; to assist disabled people in overcoming barriers; and to provide information about sources of funding. I could write to the committee about that.

Margaret Smith: That would be helpful. That is practical help.

My final question is completely separate, but I hope that you will have a short answer. Can you give us a progress update on the work on hate crimes that has been going on?

Ms Curran: I will need to get Yvonne Strachan to remind me where we are with that. I have been told that we are going through consultation at the moment; I should have known that. The working group's report has been published and it is out for consultation.

Margaret Smith: You mentioned that the partnership with disabled organisations was considering hate crime issues in relation to disabled people.

Ms Curran: Everything has been addressed properly—I do not think that we have received any representations about that.

Margaret Smith: That is great.

Marlyn Glen (North East Scotland) (Lab): My question is on BSL. On 14 January, in response to Cathie Craigie's parliamentary question S2W-4925, you noted that Scottish Executive officials were in "active dialogue" with deaf organisations and the Scottish Association of Sign Language Interpreters to produce plans for doubling the number of BSL interpreters in Scotland. What progress—if any—has been made as a result of those discussions? What is the target date for the publication and implementation of the plans?

Ms Curran: The number of BSL interpreters in Scotland has risen from 25 in 1998 to 42 in 2003. You obviously know about the other commitments. There has been active work with the British Sign Language and linguistic access working group. It is my understanding that that group's proposals for the plans have now been submitted. To an extent, we are in the group's hands, as it works through the evidence. Milestones have been reached in that regard, but David Thomson is more familiar with the subject.

David Thomson: We have been working actively with members of the British Sign Language and linguistic access working group on those plans. The key members are Heriot-Watt University, the University of Edinburgh, SASLI and a number of national deaf organisations. They have produced plans on how to proceed with the first stage of development. The plans were submitted to us a couple of weeks ago and we are busy working through the different permutations of how things might work. We hope to be able to say something positive about that in the next few months.

Marlyn Glen: In the same response, the minister mentioned the Executive's sponsoring of a research project to investigate the experience of BSL users in accessing public services. Do you have anything to report from that research and, if not, when do you expect the report to be made available?

Ms Curran: I think that that report is being worked on at the moment but has not yet been concluded.

David Thomson: That is right. We expect the final report to be with us at the end of April or in May. In addition, we are also undertaking a translation, interpreting and communications services project with Heriot-Watt University. Although that is examining wider translation issues, it will also consider BSL as part of its research.

Marlyn Glen: In the evidence that she gave to the committee in January 2003, Janet Allan of Donaldson's College reported that there were no courses in Scotland to train deaf people to teach BSL to hearing people. She also noted that a problem for industry is that there are not enough trained deaf people to run courses on deaf awareness in firms that could easily employ deaf people. Is any of the Scottish Executive's funding to support BSL aimed at that particular area and, if not, are there any plans to provide specific support to train deaf people both as teachers of BSL and, more generally, as deaf awareness trainers?

Ms Curran: We are attempting to address such issues through the work that has been described. I will let David Thomson tell you the details.

David Thomson: The Scottish Executive provides a range of funding, especially to SASLI, to promote the interpretation of British Sign Language, and relevant courses are available at Heriot-Watt University. Part of the problem that the British Sign Language working group has identified involves those issues. We hope that the plans that the group has submitted will cover many of those issues so that we can progress them.

Marlyn Glen: We will await that with interest.

Ms Curran: Given the committee's interest in the matter, we will communicate with it when we have produced the reports and have targets.

The Convener: Do you have a timescale for that? I am sure that the minister agrees that if we are serious about mainstreaming, we cannot allow deaf people to be excluded from services because interpreters or people who can use BSL are not available. Deaf people would be excellent trainers, but they feel that they are excluded and are not considered.

Ms Curran: Clearly, although I did not anticipate all the committee's questions today, I expected that question, which I talked about with my officials earlier, because we have answered parliamentary questions about the subject and we know of parliamentary interest in the matter. We have worked with people who are out there in the field and required them to submit plans to us. That is why such a time has been taken. However, we can now move forward and start to provide timescales. I do not know whether we have written down a timescale—officials always advise against doing that—but we are nearly there.

David Thomson: We have written nothing down, but if we can see how the plans fit with what we can do, we expect to be able to work on them quite quickly. We might be able to say something in the next month or two.

The Convener: The committee would welcome being kept up to date with developments.

Ms Curran: We will ensure that that happens.

The Convener: I thank the minister for her evidence this morning. I hope that the meeting was not too much of a grilling.

Ms Curran: I have always said that Equal Opportunities Committee members are a tough bunch.

The Convener: You would expect us to be.

I suspend the meeting for a short comfort break.

11:12

Meeting suspended and thereafter continued in private until 12:16.

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