

EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE

Tuesday 4 May 2004
(Morning)

Session 2

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EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE

9th 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)

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

Elaine Smith (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)

*Ms Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP)

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:

Rowena Arshad (Widening Access to Council Membership Progress Group)

Ms Margaret Curran (Minister for Communities)

Ewa Hibbert (Scottish Executive Development Department)

Susan Love (Widening Access to Council Membership Progress Group)

Yvonne Strachan (Scottish Executive Development Department)

Richard Wilkins (Scottish Executive Finance and Central Services Department)

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Steve Farrell

SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

Ruth Cooper

ASSISTANT CLERK

Roy McMahon

LOCATION

Committee Room 1

Scottish Parliament

Equal Opportunities Committee

Tuesday 4 May 2004

(Morning)

[THE DEPUTY CONVENER *opened the meeting at 10:12*]

Item in Private

The Deputy Convener (Margaret Smith): Good morning and welcome to the Equal Opportunities Committee. I apologise to the Minister for Communities for the late start. I am afraid that the convener is stuck in traffic, and so was the deputy convener. That is why I am a bit late and Cathy Peattie is not here yet. We shall proceed with me in the chair; I hope that I do not make too many mistakes.

We have received apologies from Marilyn Livingstone, Elaine Smith and Frances Curran.

The first agenda item is to ask members to agree to take in private item 5, which is to agree our approach to our report to the Finance Committee on the budget process. Is that agreed?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Interests

10:13

The Deputy Convener: I welcome to the committee Sandra White of the SNP. I hope that you will enjoy your time on the committee, Sandra, and I invite you to declare any relevant interests.

Ms Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP): I have no relevant interest to declare, other than that I believe in equality and am pleased to be a member of the Equal Opportunities Committee. Thanks very much for your welcome.

The Deputy Convener: We look forward to working with you.

Budget Process 2005-06

10:13

The Deputy Convener: For agenda item 3, I welcome Margaret Curran, the Minister for Communities, who is accompanied by Yvonne Strachan, Ewa Hibbert, Helen Mansbridge and Richard Wilkins.

Cathy Peattie has now arrived. I invite the minister to make an opening statement, during which I shall let Cathy take over in the chair.

The Minister for Communities (Ms Margaret Curran): I remember coming in late once when I was a committee convener and being in a panic about the constitutional position with regard to chairing meetings.

I am pleased to be back at the committee again, and I look forward to many more appearances at meetings at which we can discuss our shared commitment to and interest in equality. Despite our party-political differences, I appreciate the interest that other members have in the subject of equality. That is the benefit of the Parliament and the Executive having such thorough discussions, and the budget and finance obviously form a huge part of that.

I am grateful for the opportunity to give evidence about the budget process for 2005-06. I shall focus my opening remarks on two aspects of what has the potential to be a huge subject. I am sure that we can cover other issues as we go through the questions, but I would like to talk a bit about the new annual evaluation report and about the progress that we have been making on equality proofing the budget.

10:15

The last time I was here to talk about equalities, I started by saying that the budget process for this year was a bit different from the process for the previous year, and that is the mantra again this time. That is an indication of the kind of organisation that we are all engaged in; we are trying to make changes to improve matters as we progress. I am aware that Professor Midwinter has discussed some of the background to the changes with the committee and has explained why the Finance Committee recommended changes to the annual expenditure report. I shall not go into detail about that, because you all know that it is now called the annual evaluation report. It sets out strategic spending priorities and reports on performance.

The new-style document aims to improve transparency by reporting to the public how the Executive is performing against its targets. We hope that allowing committees to assess the

Executive's current performance will enhance their ability to make recommendations on spending plans in the run-up to the spending review. We have also removed much of the duplication between the AER and the draft budget document, so the welcome level of detail about expenditure targeted at improving the position of equality groups contained in last year's draft budget—with more than 100 examples—is now not duplicated in the new AER. I know that Professor Midwinter has briefed members on the reasons behind that change.

I stress, however, that equality issues have in no way been downgraded in the new AER—quite the opposite, in fact. Equality continues to be a key cross-cutting priority in the AER, among a reduced number of priorities. I appreciate that some people would prefer equality to be a stand-alone priority rather than being presented alongside “Closing the opportunity gap”, and I understand the arguments for that, but I assure members that I have no concerns about equality being downgraded in any way. I can reassure members that equality and the mainstreaming of equality will be properly pursued in our budget discussions and decisions. Members may want to question whether the priorities that are set out in the introduction to the AER are the right ones and whether they contribute to tackling inequality in all its forms. The answer is obviously yes, and I would welcome wider discussion on that.

This is a spending review year, with the AER acting as a consultation document to allow the committees to feed into that process. For the spending review, all portfolio ministers have been asked to show how they are taking forward those priorities and mainstreaming them in their portfolios' work. I know that the committee has recently had a briefing about the work of the equality proofing budget advisory group. The Executive is working with its partners in the group to improve the presentation of information about equality issues in the Executive's budget documents, to raise awareness about the need to mainstream equalities into both policies and budgets, and to investigate ways of monitoring Executive expenditure on different groups.

Professor Midwinter sits as an observer on that group and has made a helpful contribution, for which I am grateful. I understand that he has floated with members some proposals about how to conduct equality audits or reviews to analyse how our current area of expenditure increases women's employment and access to services. At the moment, we do not have the details of that suggestion, but it is something that we would be interested in exploring with the committee.

The pilot studies that the budget group is doing will analyse the needs of men and women for a

specific service and consider which of those needs the existing policy is intended to meet and to what extent the policy works in practice. That includes examining how much is spent on providing the service and on whether there are barriers to access for women and men. The group has called them sex disaggregated beneficiary analysis pilot studies—perhaps that name could do with a bit of public relations work. I can see the attraction of an equality audit in preference to that, and we essentially regard the thrust behind the equality audit as being quite similar. That is something that I would like to explore with the committee as we progress. “Sex disaggregated beneficiary analysis pilot study” is not a particularly user-friendly phrase.

The group has been trying to conduct such studies on a small scale to start off with. As we have discussed in the committee, experience elsewhere has shown that, if too much is bitten off in a larger audit, it takes such an inordinate amount of time that the area of work tends to be a bit less successful. Perhaps we can discuss that later.

Finally, I know that access to information is always an important issue for the committee. In that light, I draw to members’ attention the Executive’s new mainstreaming equalities website, which will allow researchers and others to access information from 10 different equality groups and 12 different policy areas. I hope that that new resource will ease demand for more detail to be included in the budget document and that it represents another step forward in our joint efforts to improve our understanding of how to mainstream equality in both policy and expenditure.

Margaret Smith (Edinburgh West) (LD): Not surprisingly, you have dwelt at some length on the subject that I wanted to ask about. In your introductory remarks, you said that people have expressed concerns that, because reducing inequality is not highlighted in the AER as one of the four interlinking objectives, equality issues might have been downgraded. I note that although the AER highlights sustainable development as a cross-cutting theme, it does not mention equal opportunities in a similar way. Why is that? Why are you confident that this is the right time to move from a budget in which equal opportunities was a stand-alone priority to a budget that considers the matter to have been mainstreamed? Although no committee member would disagree with mainstreaming equality, we might be a little sceptical that we have reached that point. I believe that, at last week’s Finance Committee meeting, Andy Kerr gave some reassurances on this matter. He said:

“Our experience of the previous spending review gave us

sufficient understanding of the mainstreaming of those areas, so I expect them to be reported as part of each department’s core business.”—[*Official Report, Finance Committee*, 27 April 2004; c 1302.]

Do you share his confidence that that is achievable?

Ms Curran: I broadly share his confidence, but I do not want to be complacent about things. We still need to be vigilant in pursuing that end.

This brings us back to the age-old dilemma that we have often discussed in the committee of how to deal with equality work. We know that simply putting down the heading “equality” in the budget marginalises the issue and means that nothing else gets done. However, sometimes such a heading is needed, because nothing else will drive the agenda in other areas.

This year, the word “equality” is still included in the budget process under the subheadings “Closing the opportunity gap” and “Promoting equal opportunities”. It is not as if the issue has been completely submerged for ever; the hooks are still there to allow me as the minister with responsibility for equalities and the ministers in charge of the spending review to ensure that all spending ministers are required to detail and to be held publicly accountable for what they are doing on equality issues.

As always with equality issues, we must ensure that we implement the detail of our equality work in order to deliver change. Indeed, the same is true for education or justice as it is for equalities. Although some of that will not be discussed at a high level, it will be apparent when we look at the detail of other work. However, we cannot lose our focus and drive with regard to the detail or to mainstreaming in general.

I reassure the committee that the issue of equality has not been downgraded; instead we are taking a different approach to it. Perhaps we are damned, because it seems as if we are constantly changing things. I know we get criticised for that, but to a certain extent it is the nature of the beast. People say that something is not adequate and we try to change it the next year. That said, we are keeping the matter under review.

Margaret Smith: You have rather anticipated my second question. Do you think that there are equality outcomes and agendas to be driven forward in the AER’s overall priorities of growing the economy, delivering good public services, building stronger and safer communities and revitalising democratic frameworks?

Ms Curran: Absolutely.

Margaret Smith: Are you still working alongside the ministers of those departments to ensure that they take those agendas forward?

Ms Curran: Yes. It is not possible to revitalise democracy or grow the economy without an equality agenda. That simply cannot be done, so even if we were to neglect it, we would be forced to confront the issues. I hope that my role is not a question of forcing people to do it. By the nature of the partnership agreement, there is a political commitment to drive equality towards that end, but vigilance and direction, especially on the equality unit's part, come into play in the detail of ensuring that that commitment is not just a paper commitment but is maximised and driven as far as possible.

It is possible to deliver equality ostensibly. For example, at one level, it could be said that improving the gender balance in modern apprenticeships is a way of helping to grow the economy, and it is, but it is not enough in itself; there are other things that we need to do. We need to look at such opportunities more creatively and actively rather than defensively and reactively. That is where we are at the moment; we need to push further into a more proactive approach.

Marlyn Glen (North East Scotland) (Lab): Target 16 of the communities section of the AER sets out the Executive's intention to promote equality mainstreaming within the Scottish Executive and throughout the public sector. What are the current initiatives within the Executive to promote equal opportunities in policies and services within departments?

Ms Curran: There are, I hope, a lot—I hear somebody whispering to Yvonne Strachan that I will ask her to come up with quite a number. There is a range of initiatives about which we have talked in the committee. We have always argued that we need the policy and the budget to twin each other, because we get truly equalised expenditure when we have truly equalised policy. The budget has to follow properly from the policy, but sometimes it does not, and we need detailed information and evidence to make it do that.

We have a range of policy initiatives that promote equality, such as some of the disability work that we have done, about which I talked quite a lot the previous time that I appeared before the committee. Some of the women's budget work that we have done has been highly significant. For example, the substantial commitment that we have made to expenditure on measures to combat domestic abuse—we are expanding that work, as you know—contributes enormously to the equality agenda and to the four big priorities that have been mentioned.

I will hand over to Yvonne Strachan, who will bore you to death with lots of lists.

Yvonne Strachan (Scottish Executive Development Department): Thank you, minister.

There are two or three levels at which we promote equal opportunities. We are talking about the budget level today, but on policy, we work with departments right across the piece. For example, to move forward the race agenda through our responsibilities under the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000, we have an interdepartmental implementation group, which works co-operatively. Each department has a set of actions that it is meant to deliver. Those actions are publicly presented—we have just reported on them publicly—and the departments are individually accountable for making progress on them, so there is pressure in that area not only to indicate publicly what is planned, but to demonstrate progress. On disabilities, to which the minister has referred, activities are taking place across a number of different departments to ensure that disabled people have better access to services.

In "fair for all", the Health Department has a policy that aims at patient-focused activity, part of which is to ensure that the equality agenda is an integral part of activity. That department is currently devising an equality and diversity strategy that will inform all its work, and that comes as a result of mainstreaming. In housing, we have a pilot study to equality proof the budget. As you know, the equality agenda was an integral part of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001, and the reflection of equality issues in the activity on homelessness, particularly the focus on the homelessness task force and the legislation that has been introduced as a result of its work, was recognised as being good. On local government, best value, community planning and the power to promote well-being weave the equality agenda into the Local Government in Scotland Act 2003 and its delivery through the regulations that support it.

A range of policy activities are taking place, and those are only a few—the Justice Department is implementing the equality agenda in the civil registration of partnerships and work on family law. The other issue is the systems, which we have tried to address for the long term. That means examining not only the budget, but internal business planning, our human resources policy and the way in which we manage performance. We are trying to ensure that issues of diversity and equality are reflected in the way in which we do our business, not only in the policies to which we subscribe or that we try to promote. The combination of those elements is part of what is covered under the delivery of target 16.

10:30

Marlyn Glen: It sounds as though there is a huge amount going on. How content are you with

the pace of development of the mainstreaming agenda?

Ms Curran: As Yvonne Strachan was talking, I whispered "best value". We have made progress in that what are now standard regimes of best value incorporate equality. Those of us who were active in these debates 10 or 15 years ago will be pleased to see that progress. It is important to keep that perspective, but nothing is ever good enough in our field, and we should never pat ourselves on the back and say, "Well done. That is enough." We always have to look further.

I think that the pace of development is uneven. We need to encourage more people to see equality as an answer to some of the challenges that they face, as opposed to another burden or problem, or a box that they have to tick. I hope that you do not ask me for names and addresses. There is still a wee bit more work to be done, and there is a broader argument to be had about the positive contribution of equality policy, rather than always seeing it as onerous. I am sure that you, more than anyone else, talk to equality groups that will tell you about the huge agendas that they still have.

There is still a lot more work to be done, although the principle of mainstreaming has been accepted. More people understand that, like it or lump it, it is part of their job. The next stage is the detail of how they carry out the mainstreaming.

Marlyn Glen: I would like to ask more about best value. Target 1 of the finance and public services targets states that, at the end of the month, the Executive will have in place a new framework for monitoring the delivery of local services through best value. Can you expand on that? How might you use the information that is gathered to further the mainstreaming of equality locally?

Ms Curran: Here I go, opening my big mouth about best value as if I am somehow an expert on it. I have to admit that I am not an expert on best value. I turn to my officials to answer that.

Marlyn Glen: It is something that was not considered years ago, as you said.

Ms Curran: Absolutely. Progress is being made, but I am not sure of the exact position. Can you answer that, Richard?

Richard Wilkins (Scottish Executive Finance and Central Services Department): Yes.

Ms Curran: Thank you.

Richard Wilkins: However, I am not sure of the exact position. As the AER says, the first audit began in January, and there is a rolling programme of best-value audits. We will need to check and write back to you to tell you exactly how

many audits have been begun and what their status is. We would be happy to give you more detailed information in writing on the situation with regard to best value.

Marlyn Glen: Thank you. That would be helpful. The committee also notes that the Environment and Rural Affairs Department, the Finance and Central Services Department, the National Archives of Scotland and the General Register Office for Scotland have no equality-related targets. What are your views on that? In particular, it would be useful to hear your views on the setting of equal opportunity employment targets within the public sector.

Ms Curran: My position, which sometimes differs from that of other people, is that equality can be found in every agenda. Every policy and institution has an equality dimension to it, although I accept the fact that some people do not share that view. We want to look to see whether equality is expressed in a lower-level target. I am sure that, in some instances, it is. We want to talk to those departments and be reassured about how they are pursuing equality issues. That work would naturally be done by the equality unit. We would then seek reassurances from those departments.

In some instances, best value in the public services would perhaps be seen as the answer to that. It may be embraced in another way, and there are sometimes legitimate explanations for that. We would see it as our job to search out those legitimate explanations in the first instance.

Marlyn Glen: If equality does not appear under a main heading—I understand your explanation of why it might not—we need strong, motivated people to check up all the time, so that we do not miss it. That is the difficulty, is it not?

Ms Curran: Absolutely.

Ms White: I am pleased to be here today. Thanks for inviting me along to the committee. Good morning, Margaret. We seem to be following each other around. You have appeared before every committee that I have been put on or attended. You mentioned that the agenda for the pilot studies cannot be too wide, which is, I assume, why you are doing studies on health and sports. The pilot studies are important, as was proved by the one on housing. I will start with the most obvious question: how will you go about the pilot studies? Once you have explained that, I will follow up with one or two more questions.

Ms Curran: Ewa Hibbert probably knows more of the detail—I believe that she spoke at an international conference on the matter a couple of weeks ago.

I was perhaps not clear enough in my introduction about the principle of the pilot studies.

Sandra White and I have had similar conversations in many committee meetings. Our discussions with other countries about their experiences confirm our view that if we simply attempted to do a huge gender disaggregation for the work of the Executive as a whole, it would be too large and overwhelming. We do not have the information to do that. Even doing studies by department seems too big. We are better trying to begin with a tight exercise, after which we can expand—it is better to start small. That is the principle behind the pilots.

The Scottish women's budget group and other equality groups are reassured by and involved in the process, which is the right way to proceed. As was implicit in your question, the key points are that we must draw lessons from the pilots and that they should not just be a one-off. I reassure members that that will not be the case.

Ewa Hibbert (Scottish Executive Development Department): Various studies have been done in other parts of the world, from which we are learning lessons. Some countries have attempted to carry out exercises on too large a scale and as a result have lost a little bit of good will. That happened in Catalonia. The Scottish women's budget group is drawing up a proposal for a study of sports expenditure, but before finalising the proposals for the advisory group to consider, it is examining work that is being done in Wales.

The Executive is carrying out a project on smoking cessation. We are gathering the available information about the number of men and women who smoke, the number who wish to give up and the number who have access to smoking cessation services. The aim is to see whether the take-up of services is different among men and women; how much is expended on helping each man and woman to give up; and what barriers there are to men and women accessing services. We hope to have substantially completed the project by the end of the year. When we have considered the study to see what useful information the detailed analysis of policy, expenditure and services generates, we will know whether it is worth doing a similar analysis on a larger scale. As I said, there is not a huge amount of work to show that such studies can be done on a larger scale, which is why we are starting with exploratory work.

Ms White: I understand that it is wise to concentrate on three or four smaller issues. You say that the smoking study will analyse the needs of men and women, but will you elaborate further on the sports study? You mentioned funding. Will the study consider exactly which types of sports men and women participate in and how much funding those sports receive? You also mentioned

that you will come back with reports in a year, when you have the findings. Given that the minister mentioned transparency in her opening remarks, will the reports be produced for the Parliament and the public at large?

Ewa Hibbert: I cannot give more detail about the sports pilot study at present because we are waiting for the Scottish women's budget group to provide us with further ideas about how it should be done.

Our intention is to publish the results of the studies that we undertake and to show any valuable processes or results that we have unearthed. We will then open up discussions about whether such studies are useful, or whether we should proceed differently.

Ms White: So you will produce the findings and perhaps set up a working group to discuss them.

Ms Curran: I presume that the findings will in part be discussed by the Scottish women's budget group, which is open, but we would happily have a wider discussion. If the committee has a particular interest in the detail of that, we will hold a seminar with you, as we have done before on issues that we think are important. We are happy to engage with the committee on that, because sometimes the detail cannot be discussed easily at a formal committee meeting. I am sure that there are all sorts of ways in which we or the group can engage with you appropriately.

Ms White: It would be helpful if we could have even an informal discussion about that. Although we have only two pilot schemes at the moment, you are looking to mainstream the work across all the committee areas and all ways of life. Perhaps if we could see the results of the studies, our ideas would be different from those of the working group. That would be up to the committee.

The Convener (Cathy Peattie): The committee would be interested in considering the outcome of the pilot schemes. Given my background in the voluntary sector, I have always been a bit cynical about pilot schemes, but I will try to overcome that.

Margaret Smith: I am less cynical than the convener. I welcome the pilots, but I have a couple of questions about them. When we heard about them previously it struck me that both approach the work from a gender perspective. I am not arguing that there is no need to do that, but are you content that when you get the results of the studies you will be able to expand the work across other departments and areas and that you will be able to learn lessons not only from a gender perspective but in relation to disability or lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender issues?

You are focusing on, for example, smoking cessation among men and women. In the next few

weeks we will hear about some of the health problems that the LGBT community faces, one of which is that it has a greater propensity to smoke. In developing that work, will you focus on gender until the work is up and running, or are you content that the work can cross over all the equality issues?

Ms Curran: Yvonne Strachan will correct me if I am wrong, because she knows more about the history and detail of the work. Statistics on gender are more readily available, which is why the model was developed from a gender perspective. Once we have a working model of statistical analysis, we need to ask how it would apply to other equalities interest groups. I presume that it would not apply wholesale and that we would need to adjust it, given the different circumstances of different groups. Some subjects might be more significant to one group than to others. We were not saying in principle that we were considering only gender issues and that the rest could wait for another time. We are considering how the models can help us to understand inequality and discrimination and how we promote equality. Perhaps we need to talk to the budget group as well, because it began to explore that, although I do not think that it could give you a full answer.

Yvonne Strachan: That is absolutely right. On the smoking project, we are aware that there might be issues for other equality groups. Our intention is to consider the data that emerge in the course of the work. However, the purpose of the pilots is to test the systems to enable us to determine whether the model is the best way to collect the data and whether we could roll it out. If it transpires that the model needs to be different for different equality groups, that will help the budget group to understand the situation better and to determine whether there is a need for slightly different systems to be applied. We are at the early stages, but we are using the gender perspective because data are available on men and women. As we go through the project we will want to secure any information that arises in relation to other groups.

The Convener: In your statement you talked about equality auditing. You will be aware that one of my passions is how we audit and check that we are delivering what we want to do. Professor Midwinter suggested that we should conduct equality audits that assess the existing contribution to equality of specific level 3 programmes and which highlight gaps and issues that need to be tackled. He suggested that the audits could examine and assess the current contribution that selected programmes make to equality issues through employment and access, and impact of service. What are your views on the Executive conducting equality audits? Do you feel that they could identify gaps in current provision?

10:45

Ms Curran: Possibly—I suppose it could.

I do not know the details of Arthur Midwinter's suggestion and I would be interested to hear them. If the committee decides to pursue the issue, we will be as helpful as possible. I hesitate because I am not sure how such an audit would sit alongside the work that we are doing with the budget working group and the work that we are trying to mainstream. If an equality audit could help us in that work, we would be very interested in it. We can discuss the suggestion further, to establish how it might work.

The Convener: The committee is keen to consider how an equality audit might be carried out to measure the success of mainstreaming and progress on pilots, for example.

There is clearly a need to consider how the mainstreaming equality agenda affects a host of things. We talked earlier about best value and it is quite exciting to think about that in terms of mainstreaming equality, but we must ensure that it is not just about paying lip service to the idea. For example, how can we know whether equality is being mainstreamed into community planning and that that is not just about good intentions? The Executive has done a lot and intends to mainstream equality in the agencies that it funds, but we need to know that mechanisms are in place that can measure whether that mainstreaming is happening and, more important, whether it is making life better for the folk it is intended to help.

Ms Curran: I agree absolutely: we need to look at those mechanisms. We have tried to do that in much of the work that we have been developing on assessing the impact of expenditure.

I would like to know whether an equality audit would add a new dimension to that work. We must not make the mistakes of the past, when the approach was, "Let's assess everything." We could not reasonably carry out a full-scale equality audit of community planning, housing, education, best value and everything else, because other countries have been overwhelmed when they have tried to do that, as Ewa Hibbert said. We do not have the data. When I took on this job, I assumed naively that we could tell officials, "You will just have to find that information", but it is not as straightforward as that.

That is not to say no to an equality audit, however. If there are other models that we can consider, I will be desperately keen to discuss and engage with them.

The Convener: It is possible to develop data, for example by choosing to measure a particular area now and in 18 months' time, to ascertain whether the mainstreaming agenda has developed

and is delivering in the intended way. We would like to discuss a number of issues with you and officials and we would like to pursue the question of where equality audits might be developed. We are not suggesting that an equality audit should be carried out across your entire portfolio, but perhaps we could consider particular areas.

Ms Curran: Following Sandra White's suggestion, we could run a workshop, such as the one that we ran on the pilot work that the budget working group is doing. If the committee agrees, I could meet the convener, a member of the committee and Professor Midwinter, to consider the detail of his suggestion. I am sure that we could make progress; our agendas are not terribly far apart.

The Convener: You are right. It is clear that much good work has been done, but we would appreciate an opportunity to consider some of that work in more detail.

Shiona Baird (North East Scotland) (Green): In the AER, the Executive says:

"we will target our efforts on communities who are underrepresented in the workforce."

How can the committee be sure that underrepresented groups are being targeted for inclusion in the modern apprenticeships initiative, as the Scottish Executive Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Department's target 4 states? How can we be sure that such initiatives mainstream equality from the outset?

Also, is the Executive taking action to tackle gender inequality in subject choices?

Ms Curran: Yvonne Strachan will remind me of the details, but I recall discussion about how inequality in the school curriculum is being addressed more broadly. Equality groups have made proposals to promote equality in that. Discussions are being held with the Education Department, which is undertaking a variety of initiatives.

Yvonne Strachan: Gender inequality in subject choices has been raised. The Equal Opportunities Commission has been concerned about the matter for several years. Such issues, or at least the links between education, the choices that young girls make and their employability, were also discussed in the strategic group on women's report. The Education Department has had discussions with the Equal Opportunities Commission and in general about the importance of education in tackling gender inequality.

The strategic group on women's report linked education and employment. It has been suggested that the Executive could consider discussing employability, which is the responsibility not only of the Education Department, but of other

portfolios that cover skills training and other employment issues. We are considering that to ensure that gender inequality issues do not focus only on education but recognise its relationship to employment and other matters. We are considering what further work is needed.

Ms Curran: As Shiona Baird said, the modern apprenticeship scheme targets under-represented groups. Although male participation predominates, female participation in the programme has grown from 14 per cent to 35 per cent. A variety of work is undertaken more broadly as part of the enterprise agenda.

Equalities money has recently funded a social economy unit project to encourage women to develop entrepreneurial and business skills, which we have targeted at disadvantaged areas. The money that I have committed hits the double whammy of disadvantaged areas and women from disadvantaged backgrounds. Such work is being done to pursue equalities issues. There is a variety of other measures. Some of our work on race equality has picked up the issue, too. I do not know whether that answers your question.

Shiona Baird: It helps to have the matter covered—it is a major issue. Your answer begs a question: What monitoring will be in place to ensure that targets are met?

Ms Curran: Broad monitoring takes place. I presume that monitoring female and male participation rates is straightforward, especially in the modern apprenticeship scheme. The discussion about what works most successfully with each group involves a level of detail beneath that.

Hidden discrimination might take place, for example, because of some cultural practices. Perhaps people from some groups do not participate in some schemes. LGBT groups might not participate in the modern apprenticeship scheme for a variety of cultural reasons that we may not even know about. That is a much deeper level of analysis that we need to reach; we are not there yet, but we are beginning to say that we need to target under-represented groups. We are developing approaches to that.

The Convener: Are the awareness and training of those groups' advisers a factor?

Ms Curran: Yes.

The Convener: For example, young women may do well at school, but the reality is that their take-up of some jobs in the industrial sector and other similar sectors remains low. It is still suggested that young women should go into administration and that that is what young women do. That is a question of the awareness and training of young people's advisers as much as it

is of young people's choices. Do you have a remit to oversee such advice or the work that Careers Scotland and the enterprise companies do?

Ms Curran: We do that only in the broadest sense on equality issues. The equality unit and I could get involved. We could ask what training had been undertaken, what the outcomes of it were and what advice was given to people who got in touch with the careers service. Ministerial colleagues would be sympathetic on the matter—I have never had a difficulty because a fellow minister has been otherwise, so I cannot imagine that it would be a problem.

We are beginning to ask questions in this area, especially because we have targets to reach. It comes back to the fundamental question of subject choice and the early separation that comes with schooling and subject choice, which directly follows on to career choice when people are going to university or joining the work force. We would have a role to play in that.

Shiona Baird: During its preliminary examination of disability, the committee has already identified access to work and further and higher education as key issues. Is the Executive content that disabled people will benefit from the working for families fund? How will the fund's impact be measured? Is the Executive content that other equality groups will benefit from the initiative?

Ms Curran: It is always difficult to answer the question, "Are you content?" I am never content, but perhaps that is just a personality dysfunction. We take a strong interest in the measures that are aimed at developing disabled people's access to all opportunities, particularly working opportunities, which is a subject in which I know the committee is interested. It is largely about ensuring that any contribution that we make is appropriately deployed or that it supports access to as many opportunities as possible. Monitoring of all initiatives that interface with our policies or that support the drives that we are trying to develop is on-going.

Yvonne Strachan: One of the targets is to ensure that parents who have difficulty with disability, who have mental health issues or who have drug or alcohol problems will be part of the focus of the funding. Some of the proposals that have already been submitted cover those areas, and relate to employment and employability among groups, including people with disabilities. It is a little early to say what the result of that will be. The fund has only just started, so it is difficult to know at this stage the number of people who are involved. That will be possible as the proposals are implemented over the year.

Shiona Baird: Time and again, disability groups have indicated to us that it is not so much their disabilities that are the actual barriers, but the employers. A huge raft of work needs to be done on that.

Ms Curran: I am sure that we will have a broader discussion of the issue later, but I would mention that employability is a key theme of the ministerial group on closing the opportunity gap. The point that you have made will be addressed by that group. The issue is the social exclusion that is caused by how society is structured—the social model of disability. That will be embraced by the group, not just in relation to disabled people but in relation to other key target groups of the population. We will have discussions with employers on a variety of fronts, and I will ensure that the committee's interests are represented in those discussions.

Shiona Baird: I do not know whether you can do anything about it but, to my mind, having spoken to people with disabilities, two of the biggest barriers to accessing information are automated telephone systems and call centres. We should be aware of the problems that such set-ups can cause. For those of us who have good hearing, they do not pose a significant problem. However, people with any kind of hearing disability have a major problem. Even if you are not able to do anything about that, minister, it is a major problem, and the Executive perhaps needs to discuss it. If a fundamental thing like that is creating a barrier in Scotland, we need to address it.

Ms Curran: I absolutely take that point. When we were running our domestic abuse publicity, a helpline was set up—we automatically assume that helplines work for everybody. However, several disability groups told us that the helpline was not appropriate, especially for particularly vulnerable women. I believe that we then added a qwerty facility to the helpline. We also added something to the advert on domestic abuse to target specialist groups. I do not know whether we have had any feedback on how successful that was. However, I take your point, which was well made. Our standard responses, such as helplines, often do not work for key groups in the population. We can at least think about what we can do about that in our work.

11:00

Margaret Smith: The committee is due to hear from the inclusion project on its report "Towards a Healthier LGBT Scotland", which identified key priorities and issues that impact on LGBT people's health and well being. Can you explain how initiatives such as the inclusion project can inform the Executive's spending and targets in relation to equality groups and how you see that being developed?

Ms Curran: I have just been given a bit of paper that informs me about that health report. I would encourage groups such as Inclusion Scotland to help us to understand not just health but how people experience services and what services do for their quality of life or any other aspect of their experience. As I understand it, the inclusion project's report is an interim one, which we would be happy to discuss with them. We can encourage issues that the report addresses to be taken forward for the final report.

Margaret Smith: The inclusion project published an interim report and it is now doing audits. The project has been extended by six months, so the information that I gave colleagues a week or two ago was erroneous. The project has been so successful that it has been extended to allow it to do a bit more work. The issue that you touched on earlier, minister, about the lack of statistics is important. If we do not know exactly what we are dealing with, it is difficult to do something to remedy any problems.

Ms Curran: You are probably aware that the Health Department is developing an equality and diversity strategy that will tie in with the national health service accountability review and will include a monitoring element to look for evidence that all potentially excluded or discriminated-against communities or individuals can access the care and treatment that they require. The LGBT health project can influence that, as can other communities or individuals. Perhaps we can come back to that matter.

Margaret Smith: I have a supplementary question. We are going to question the Minister for Health and Community Care about the Health Department's strategy, so I am probably being slightly unfair in asking you about it, minister. You welcome the fact that you work with inclusion. I believe that you—probably more than any other minister—know how beneficial the voluntary sector is.

An issue about the funding of some LGBT groups has been brought to my attention in the past few days. A third of the LGBT voluntary sector's work is in health. The Executive's health improvement agenda is reliant on the Executive's partners being able to fulfil their parts of the bargain. However, I have been informed that LGBT groups find it difficult to secure lottery funding and sometimes find it difficult to secure local authority funding. I use those groups as an example, but I believe that the funding difficulty applies to equality groups across the board. Does the Executive monitor whether equality groups have difficulty getting funding to develop the agenda that the Executive is trying to work on with such groups?

Ms Curran: That is a huge and significant issue

and I have two points to make on it. The first is on LGBT groups. You will know that we meet the networks regularly. In fact, the most recent big discussion we had with them was on funding—at least, the subject certainly came up at the meeting. I am not being complacent, but at least the Executive is putting funding into the LGBT community, which has never been done before. The LGBT community itself would recognise that the Scottish Executive probably leads the way in providing funding, compared with other bodies that you mentioned. I am proud that the Executive is doing that. I believe that it marks Scotland out as progressive in recognising LGBT needs. However, as I said, we are not complacent, because there are key funding gaps in the LGBT groups' work.

That takes me on to the second point about the broader equality issues. Margaret Smith will probably know that we are undertaking a strategic review of voluntary sector funding. Meetings were held recently between equality interests and the strategic review group to examine the cumulative equality funding package that is represented by voluntary sector funding. That work is on-going, so the answer to the question is a direct yes.

Yvonne Strachan and I smiled at each other when we heard the question because of all of the different strands that now associate themselves around the equality interest, which has grown in the short time that we have been involved in it. I am thinking of the new dimension around faith, sectarianism and those kinds of serious issues.

We are having to look again at how that work is funded, because a lot of it is disparately funded. When I look at some of the funding networks around race work, I can see that some work is very well funded but other work seems to be quite inadequately funded. The equality interest has grown incrementally; perhaps we have not looked strategically enough at it, but that is exactly what we are doing at the moment.

We are having a look at funding across race groups at the moment because I do not think that we have enough of a strategic grip on the issue in Scotland. A person is lucky if they live in an area that had the wit to apply for funding 10 years ago and has managed to retain that historic funding. If someone lives in another area that did not have the workers with the wit to apply for funding even five years ago, those areas do not get it.

At this time, that is quite inadequate. We need to re-examine the matter. We are taking a broad strategic look at equality after which we will look at different aspects of it. That will take us some time, however. I imagine that the discussion is one that we will have for some time.

Margaret Smith: I agree with what the minister said. The Executive is leading the way. I welcome

what the minister said about the review. Will it consider issues such as lottery funding and the attitudes of local councils to such funding?

Ms Curran: Yes. The review is a partnership between the Executive, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations. It will look at funding and I will keep Margaret Smith posted about it. If she is particularly interested in the review, I will arrange for an official to brief her about it.

Margaret Smith: Yes, I would be interested in that. Thank you.

Mrs Nanette Milne (North East Scotland) (Con): The more equality issues are unravelled, the more complicated the picture becomes. The Executive has stated that, in line with its partnership agreement commitments, a major review of cultural strategy would be embarked on. I think that a commission was set up last month to look into the matter. How can the committee be assured that equality issues are mainstreamed into the Executive's cultural strategy? How can we be further assured that they will directly inform the establishment of future targets in that area?

Ms Curran: I suppose that the answer will be similar to those that I have given to previous questions, which is that there is a requirement for all kinds of strategic approaches that the Executive might take—culture, health or whatever—to include an equalities component.

I met the Minister for Tourism, Culture and Sport four or five weeks ago and at least half of our discussion was on equality interests. Some of the discussion concerned the unevenness of some of the funding. There are some very interesting funding arrangements, for example in relation to disability and the arts, but funding is uneven. Again, history explains why that is the case. We are trying to take a much more systematic approach to funding.

We need partly to ensure that equality issues are flagged up in documents such as the cultural strategy. Many equality issues are also connected to social inclusion issues. The cultural strategy has taken that approach in its definition of disadvantaged peoples' access to the arts. Although work has also been done around gender and disability, it may be that other areas need to be explored a bit more. The Executive has ensured that the new commission has an equalities dimension to its responsibilities.

Mrs Milne: I have a couple of questions on specific communities' targets. Target 4 of the communities' portfolio states:

"We will demonstrate that we are closing the opportunity gap for disadvantaged communities in respect of key outcomes for education, health, justice, transport, housing and jobs".

The target uses the term "disadvantaged communities" and not "disadvantaged groups". Can you explain the rationale that underpins the target? How might it impact more generally on equality groups? Is there a case for a similar approach to be taken for equality groups themselves?

Ms Curran: Yes, there may well be. Essentially, the broad way in which we look at the issue is to look at disadvantaged communities, which tend to be the sort of geographic communities in which there is clear evidence that people suffer social exclusion or poverty, for example. The social inclusion partnership strategy is based on that premise. Although there are various models, the Arbuthnott formula on health is one example. Members might like to get into an argument on Arbuthnott, but that is an argument for Malcolm Chisholm. It is only a different way of saying that there are areas in Scotland that suffer disproportionate levels of poverty. We have to find a way of addressing the needs of those communities. For example, why are places such as Parkhead and Shettleston so poor and sick compared with other areas? I will not give specific cases, but members know the basic arguments about disadvantaged communities.

We also know that discrimination exists beyond that and that the issue is more complex than that. It is not just a geographical experience; it is also an individual experience and it can be a community-of-interest experience. For example, we know that disabled people face disproportionate levels of exclusion from the work force and that employment and promotion statistics show that a disproportionate number of people from certain ethnic minority backgrounds do less well. There are two views of the issue; that of geographical communities and that of communities of interest. Spending will reflect both types of community and we can debate to what extent and proportion it will do so. It is an on-going debate and some social policy courses are stuffed full of discussions about such matters. I do not know if we will ever resolve the problem.

Mrs Milne: As you know, the Arbuthnott formula—which you called the red-rag issue—is a sore point with me. When you consider inequality in communities, I hope that you will bear in mind that there are inequalities even in relatively affluent communities such as parts of the north-east of Scotland, where there are some seriously deprived communities in the rural areas and inner cities. That issue has to be unravelled at the same time as we are working on the more obviously deprived areas in the central belt.

Ms Curran: I accept that. We have tried to ensure that we understand disadvantage, if I may use that term, in the broader sense and that we

cover a variety of experience. We cannot just examine disadvantage over too big an area because, even in some deprived areas, there can be pockets of affluence. We are in an absurd situation when someone who lives on one side of the street can access funding but someone who lives on the other side cannot. The figures about the area might have been compiled 10 years ago, and three major housing schemes might have been built that have changed the community's socioeconomic status, so people's hands are tied. With social inclusion partnership funding, we are trying to move away from that to allow community planning partnerships a bit more flexibility in the areas to which they can direct funding. The partnerships can see where there might have been socioeconomic change.

If we considered Aberdeenshire, we might think that it is well off relative to the east end of Glasgow, and no one would dispute that. However, we have to consider the smaller communities and much smaller enumeration districts. A lot of statisticians have been examining that issue, so we will be able to start to pinpoint areas of poverty in Scotland.

I have to say that Parkhead and Shettleston still keep coming up in those statistics, and the statistics are all viable. If someone is disabled and they live in a poor area, their experience will be worse because of all the other things that go with that. Presumably that is not controversial.

Mrs Milne: I do not disagree with you, as long as detailed analysis is going on and is being updated regularly.

Target 15 in the communities portfolio is about opportunities to get involved in volunteering. The disabled groups that we met in December made it quite clear that several of them would like to get involved in voluntary activity. How can the Executive ensure that target 15 allows people from under-represented groups to volunteer and become active citizens, as they clearly want to be?

Ms Curran: The wonderful person sitting beside me has just provided me with exactly what I need to say to you.

We provide funding of £2 million per annum to the national network of volunteer centres, which promote, support and develop volunteering in each local authority area. The centres should have the expertise in supporting people with disabilities to undertake activities that will allow them to develop the appropriate skills to support local initiatives. We have also given £2.5 million to the Council for Voluntary Service (Scotland), which, again, has particular skills.

We fund a variety of areas to support that kind of work; for example, education is linked to Disability Scotland and funding is part of our support for

that. We try to support groups to ensure that volunteering strategies are appropriately attuned to the different needs of the population. People have very old-fashioned notions of volunteering—they tend to think that it is done only by people who have spare time on their hands and want to do good works in their communities. We all know that volunteering is quite different from that, and we want to target key groups in the population. In particular, we want to encourage more young people to volunteer because voluntary activity will also be of benefit to them.

Strategies should be attuned to the needs of groups in the population and they should also be appropriately attuned to the needs of disabled people. Volunteering organisations are now much more on top of that agenda.

Mrs Milne: That is good, because clearly there is a large, untapped source of people who are willing and able to volunteer in certain ways.

Ms Curran: With a small amount of adjustment, buildings and facilities can help them to do that.

The Convener: I thank the minister and her colleagues for giving evidence this morning. There will be a short suspension to allow for the changeover of witnesses.

11:15

Meeting suspended.

11:20

On resuming—

Council Membership (Widening Access)

The Convener: I warmly welcome Rowena Arshad and Susan Love from the widening access to council membership progress group. I invite Rowena Arshad to make a short statement before we ask questions.

Rowena Arshad (Widening Access to Council Membership Progress Group): Thank you for inviting us to provide details and to have a discussion with you.

I am sure that the committee has full details of the group's membership and remit. I was invited by Andy Kerr to chair the group and we started work in October last year. The group was set up to consider the widening of access to council membership to a cross-section of the community, to provide guidance on politically restricted posts, and to make recommendations on the training, development and support that are given to councillors.

Although much of our work is not directly connected to the provisions of the Local Governance (Scotland) Bill, there are areas of overlap. One part of our remit that is directly related to the bill is the preparation of guidance on politically restricted posts. We are meeting a range of people, including councillors, political parties, unions and equalities groups, and that process will continue until the summer. The committee might want to ask us more about that. Some of the key issues that are arising are the public perception of local government, remuneration for councillors, and the role that political parties can play in helping people to come forward.

We intend to report to the minister in the autumn. It will then be for ministers to decide how to take forward our recommendations.

Margaret Smith: How was the group made up and how does it go about its work of examining the issues that affect various under-represented groups? Does the group contain adequate representation from the relevant communities?

Rowena Arshad: The minister, Andy Kerr, advised on the composition of the group and we were invited to join it. We are working well together and collectively we bring to the group a wide enough range of networks. All the equalities strands are represented through the equalities co-ordinating group, which is represented on our group by John Wilkes. The business sector is also represented, and the group includes councillors,

former councillors and a member from the Scottish Youth Parliament. I am not sure whether representative is the correct word, but I hope that we are sufficiently well connected around the circuits to be able to draw on the resources in Scotland.

Margaret Smith: Has the group had adequate time to do its work, or would it have benefited from having a longer timescale?

Rowena Arshad: We are not running to the timetable of the Local Governance (Scotland) Bill; we have a slightly more relaxed timescale. I read the evidence that touched on the progress group's work in the *Official Report* of the Equal Opportunities Committee, and I was conscious that, at that time, people were not aware of the group's existence.

We started in October and were slower in making progress than we would have liked. That is partly because we wanted to think about the venues to which we would go around the country and the people to whom we needed to speak. Really, the work of the group took off in February.

We have not had a long enough time to do the necessary work. Issues are arising at the moment and we have to get our act together and get the work done. Making the timescale longer would not increase the depth of the work.

Margaret Smith: Do you feel that you have an understanding of what the barriers are?

Rowena Arshad: I think that we are beginning to get an understanding of that.

Ms White: I have known Susan Love for a number of years and am happy to meet her again.

Rowena Arshad talked about the overlap with the Local Governance (Scotland) Bill. As a member of the Local Government and Transport Committee, I know what you mean. However, I welcome the idea of having a small working group to examine public perceptions and the availability of people who are able to get into local politics. My questions are based on an understanding that the group has done some work on that area.

What is your understanding of public perceptions of local politics, based on the consultation that you have done? Does the evidence suggest that some groups are more disengaged from the process than others, even within the under-represented groups? If so, what are the implications for tackling the problems?

Rowena Arshad: There is a range of perceptions. There is a lot of confusion about what local councillors do. People have used local councillors in relation to particular issues and, if they do not have an issue, they do not engage with the process. People also have a range of

other options, such as community councils, citizens advice bureaux and other advice groups.

The question of whether some groups are more under-represented than others is interesting and one that we will continue to pursue. We would have to examine who is involved with community councils, because that is one of the routes by which people become involved with the local council. We are particularly keen to consider the involvement of young people, ethnic minorities and people with disabilities. If you have seen our schedule for Aberdeen, you will know that we have been examining those groups in particular.

We are on the cusp of that work. Until now, we have met only political parties, councillors and trade unions. From now on, we will be examining the community side of the issue.

Susan Love (Widening Access to Council Membership Progress Group): In speaking to people, we have been trying to find out about the difference between being involved in a community and wanting to stand for election to local government. So far, we have seen that there does not appear to be a huge problem with certain groups being involved in their community or being interested in issues. However, they are not willing to take the step of standing for local government.

The issue of why people do not want to stand for local government is interesting. People have told us that it is not because they are not interested or lack confidence, but because they do not feel that that is for them. Funnily enough, those who are politically active say that they would be happier to stand for the Scottish Parliament than for the council. There is something peculiar about local government that means that people do not want to get involved in it. That is obviously more distinct in certain groups. Rowena Arshad said that we would be doing more work on women, for example, because there is a huge lack of gender balance among councillors and council candidates. There does not seem to be the same imbalance in community involvement. We want to do more work on that.

11:30

Ms White: As someone who has been—and thoroughly enjoyed being—a local councillor, I know how difficult it is for women to get on that ladder.

The Scottish Youth Parliament has suggested that politics should be part of the curriculum. I have always supported that view; politics could be studied in modern studies or good citizenship classes. Do you think that having that form of education on the curriculum would help younger people to understand local government, for example, and to participate in it by being elected

as councillors? Did your findings include any such discoveries?

Rowena Arshad: We have not made that specific finding yet, but I would have thought that there is a lot of merit in the suggestion. A great deal is done on the Parliament in modern studies and through various other curricular initiatives, but I am less conscious of a lot being done about local government. We might need to speak to educators about that balance.

The fact that the Parliament is seen as the next step up from activity at community level, with the result that local government is bypassed, is intriguing. That ties in with perceptions of remuneration. The comment was made that, although people would never consider not paying their MSP or asking them to be an MSP for the love of their country, they would expect that of their local councillor. Why is that? All those issues are linked. I note—and agree with—your suggestion about education.

Susan Love: Much of the evidence that councillors have given us is that the public have a very limited understanding of how much local government affects their day-to-day lives and of the relevance of their councillor.

Ms White: It is interesting that, although local government is perceived to be closer than the Scottish Parliament and Westminster, people have less knowledge of it. We should take that on board. I did not realise that people just did not know as much about local government, so I think that it should be covered in the curriculum.

You mentioned that people join community councils and interest groups to put forward their views to local government. We have heard from disabled groups that a similar thing happens with disabled people. How do we avoid getting people to use gatekeepers to put forward their ideas? How do we get through to the grass roots and the relevant groups to ensure that people such as disabled people are heard in their communities and that what they say is acted on directly? Do you think that your consultation will pick up on that type of issue?

Rowena Arshad: I hope so. There is confusion, but we need to demystify what councillors and councils do other than get blamed when services are not provided. That is the level at which people interact; they need to have their understanding broadened.

In my experience of the voluntary sector, people tend to see councillors as people whom they should lobby if their community groups' budgets are being cut or there are problems with the swimming pools, for example. That knowledge needs to be widened so that there is more participation.

On gatekeepers, I suppose that there is a need for elected members and council officers to become more visible to communities. They need to meet where communities meet and they should not expect meetings to occur only at surgeries or when one-hour or two-hour sessions are held in the local community centre. There has to be more of that; engagement must be wider so that councillors do not meet their communities only on local gala days but on days such as those on which there is an Eid celebration somewhere. That is happening more and more, so perhaps people are feeling more confident as time trickles on. However, I think that work needs to be done with community group workers and practitioners to get them to think about using their councillors more proactively, rather than to use them purely as a means of complaining about something.

Ms White: There is the local community fund and there is talk of communities being involved in planning issues. When new housing or new transport infrastructure is being built, could councils be more proactive in reaching out to groups such as disabled people and offering them the opportunity to get involved?

Rowena Arshad: Councils have done quite a bit of work on accessibility and have tailored their provision so that communities can come forward. Councils have worked hard, although I am not saying that what they have done is perfect.

Our group will ask councils how they have audited their work in terms of mainstreaming equality. They can do that in the budget areas for which they are responsible. If someone is involved in a community planning exercise or some other initiative, it will be up to them to consider how they involve people with disabilities. Such involvement should not be bolted on at the end and then passed on to the council's equal opportunities committee or equality person.

When people think about disability, they tend to think of wheelchairs and access issues, or of visual impairment or deafness. However, we have to consider the other disabilities. If you have epilepsy, it is a hidden disability; or if you have a form of disability that means that you do not want to climb three flights of stairs, it may be that nobody will ask you about it. We need to broaden our thinking on disability.

Mrs Milne: Before I ask a question, I would like to say that it is important to engage people at community council level. I graduated from being a community councillor to being a councillor. I enjoyed the parish work of being a community councillor very much and, if people are engaged at that level, the transition to the work of a councillor is easier.

I want to back-pedal a little and ask about your

consultation. How successful have you been in engaging with groups that are under-represented as councillors? Are there any gaps in the groups from which you have been able to take evidence so far?

Rowena Arshad: We are a month into our consultation. We have written to more than 350 organisations and, to date, we have had three responses. We have quite a bit of chasing up to do. The lack of responses may be because some groups are small and do not have the staff time available to write back, or it may be because the issue is pretty low on people's agenda. We will have to find out.

We have specifically targeted 20 or so organisations, which are probably the larger community-type organisations. We will not necessarily have to chase up umbrella organisations, such as the Scottish Civic Forum or the Black and Ethnic Minority Infrastructure in Scotland, because we would hope to receive direct responses from them. It is the groups at community level that we may have to chase up. I do not know whether they have not responded because of a lack of interest or because they have nothing to say about the issue.

Mrs Milne: I am surprised that the response has been so poor. That is disappointing. There must be some way of engaging people and letting them know how important it is that they give their views.

How do you propose to consult those groups? When you spoke to the Local Government and Transport Committee, you said that you were keen to travel extensively to consult. Will you have to get right down to grass-roots level so that you really engage with smaller groups across the country?

Rowena Arshad: We are going to Aberdeen and Glasgow, for example, and we are trying to have evening meetings and not just meetings during the day. We are having to consider our timescales and the times when members of our secretariat are available. Some groups will not come to evidence sessions, so we will try to speak to perhaps just two members of the group. We have to explore those options. It is important to have meetings in the evening and to travel around. We would love to travel a lot more as we are not, for example, hitting any of the islands. However, if people write to the group, ring us up or e-mail us to say that they would prefer a smaller meeting, I am not opposed to that. We will try to accommodate such requests as much as we can.

Mrs Milne: That sounds like a way forward. Have you had much in the way of written evidence?

Rowena Arshad: We have received some written evidence, but we have not yet examined it

all. I have also had direct phone calls through the SCVO newsletter. People who know who I am, and in particular those who know where I work, will ring up and say what they want to say; that has been helpful.

Mrs Milne: We have heard about particular issues—including child care facilities and the representation of minorities, such as ethnic minorities—with regard to rural areas. I presume that you have not yet been able to consult widely with people in those areas. I assume that you plan to go to see people in rural areas and identify any barriers that exist.

Rowena Arshad: Absolutely. Such issues are particularly relevant in relation to rural areas and to independents. Independent councillors have to stand on their own, and often they are without any natural group to be mentored by in a council. There are issues about training and support. People who want to stand in rural areas often face those issues.

Susan Love: Some of the evidence that we have received from councillors in rural areas is about accessibility, time constraints and the impact that such issues have on the support that they receive. We have heard about some of those issues and we hope that we will hear more about them in Aberdeen.

Mrs Milne: I was a councillor in Aberdeen and I am now quite closely involved with Aberdeenshire. In some remote parts of Aberdeenshire, people feel cut off from council services and councillors. A lot of work must be done on what is happening in remote areas.

Susan Love: Some of the evidence that we have heard from councillors suggests that it is not only those in rural areas who might have difficulty in, for example, accessing facilities. Although some councillors in rural areas might have facilities provided in their home because they are so far away from the council headquarters, those who live near the headquarters but work far away are not given the same opportunity. Their employment poses a barrier for them, because they do not have time during the day to get from their employment to the council headquarters and back to work or back home. The issue has not only been raised by rural councillors.

The Convener: In your update letter to the convener of the Local Government and Transport Committee, you report that you have held discussions with representatives of a range of political parties and have plans to hear from councillors. What is the understanding among those stakeholders of the various barriers to participation?

Rowena Arshad: I will start and perhaps Susan Love can chip in.

Overall, the main concern is about people not coming forward. In a nutshell, the problem is, “How can we select people if we do not have a pool from which to select?” There is variation in the experience of different political parties on the issue, but that is one point that was raised.

The political parties have been working, pretty much unanimously, on selection procedures and ensuring that selection teams are at fault with equal opportunity principles and all that kind of stuff. Some political parties have gone forward to positive action measures such as mentoring and shadowing. The discussion seems to be around those issues; there is nothing overly new in that respect.

Susan Love: The parties have a fair understanding of the issues, but I sense from all the political parties that there is almost desperation as to what to do about the situation. Although they had considered measures, most of them indicated that too few people were coming forward for them to be able to impose any kind of selection procedures. For example, the parties could not get people to come forward for training. There seemed to be an air of “Well, we know about it, but there is nothing we can do about it.” That was the case throughout the political parties.

11:45

The Convener: There appears to be a real issue, not only to do with the traditional councillor, but concerning whether people—in full-time employment, or regardless of their background—consider standing for council. My experience is that, if a person is able and willing, selection and training sometimes go by the by. Do you see any change in that? Would removing some of the barriers encourage more people to participate or to consider putting their names forward?

Rowena Arshad: Are you talking about people who are already active in the political process or active within their party?

The Convener: Yes.

Rowena Arshad: I am not sure whether it ties in to your question, but we wanted to bring to the committee an issue that we are keen to consider, which is the whole culture in local government and within political parties. I am talking about the culture of male domination and ways of working that are sometimes unnecessarily adversarial. Particular past experiences are perhaps less valued. Women tend to have a range of backgrounds and experiences, such as in the voluntary sector. Are those experiences seen to be as valid during selection?

We are talking about a change of mindset and we have to nail the issue on the head. We have to

be honest with ourselves and say that, unless the mindset changes, many under-represented groups will not put themselves forward or that the people who put themselves forward will be the same types as the ones who are already there, which means that a small group will keep perpetuating itself.

Susan Love: One of the issues that are coming up is that, although political parties would not want to put up any barriers, there is the realpolitik of fighting elections and the decisions about which candidates should be put in certain wards. It has been suggested that people from the under-represented groups, or people who were seen to be different in some way, might feel that they would not always get the support of their local party, the council or the local press. That would put them off wanting to hold any kind of position or even to stand for election. The political parties have not said anything about that.

The Convener: In written evidence to the committee, Fiona Mackay recommended that local authorities and political parties should undertake reviews of the potential barriers to the full participation of women, minority ethnic groups, disabled people and others. Do you feel that that would be productive? If so, do you have any suggestions about how it might best be done?

Rowena Arshad: I would have thought that that was in line with Kerley's recommendations and with recommendations from other reports. The suggestion is nothing new, although I accept that such reviews need to be done.

Hard questions should be asked. Susan Love mentioned issues that were coming up. One such issue is that, if a gay candidate has their life exposed in the press, what backing will they get, immediately, from their party? That is a hard question. We should ask every selection group, every constituency party and the political party as a whole what they would do. If the answer is hesitance and I were a gay or lesbian potential candidate, whose life and that of my family might be in the press, I could see myself hanging back and not coming forward.

The other side of that issue is that potential candidates have said to us, "I know that there might be an aspect of me that might get pilloried in the press and I don't wish to bring my party down." We need to discuss such issues. If we are going to change the culture and the mindset, we do not just need statistics; we need to go right down to the difficult questions.

The Convener: So we must deal with the culture and address issues around it.

The 50/50 Campaign has expressed concerns to the committee about the culture in political parties suiting a certain kind of person—Rowena Arshad

has alluded to that—and figures show that only 22 per cent of councillors are women. It is clear that cultural change in local government is crucial. Local organisations—particularly women's organisations—have expressed concerns to me after they have visited their local authorities and observed the culture in council meetings. That culture is a real barrier and can discourage women from entering local government.

The fact that Susan Love spoke about people perhaps aspiring from community level to the Scottish Parliament is interesting. Do the culture and the number of women in the Parliament encourage people to think that they can participate? It is clear that the fairly macho culture in some local authorities—although not in all—can be a real barrier to participation.

Rowena Arshad: The high profile that the Scottish Parliament has given to its commitment to equal opportunities and the presence of women in it has, without a doubt, made standing for the Parliament an attractive option for people who are thinking about a political career or about taking a more active role in politics and governance.

The macho culture of local government should not be understated. Evidence that we have received relates directly to what you say about the presence of women in the Scottish Parliament being a positive factor that has encouraged more women to consider taking that route; we have also heard evidence about the macho, negative and parochial culture of local government in the majority of councils. Those views have not come out directly in every piece of evidence, but sufficient numbers of people whom we have met have talked specifically about how they have been put off by such a culture. We must tackle sexism in the same way as we have tackled hard-core race issues, such as institutional racism. We must not shy away from the issue and I hope that our report will not do so.

The Convener: I welcome that. After 20 years in politics, I see some changes, but some days I do not see any.

Marlyn Glen: I have a question about care costs. In evidence to the committee, it has been suggested that the provision of a subsidy for care costs, whether for child care or care for other dependants, would facilitate participation, particularly by women. The committee made a recommendation to the Local Government and Transport Committee about allowances for disabled people who require care support and for people with caring responsibilities. What is your view on that? Has the issue been raised significantly in consultation?

Rowena Arshad: The issue of remuneration has certainly been raised, but I am not sure

whether the issue of caring has been raised specifically so far. However, we will, of course, come to groups to consider disability issues and a range of other issues as we proceed to Aberdeen and Glasgow.

We need to consider the notion of whether a person can afford to be a councillor, particularly if they are on their own, supporting a family or do not have another means of income, such as a business that could tick over. When we were considering rural and urban issues, we made a distinction between big businesses, which might have a corporate social responsibility policy of encouraging employees to come forward, and very small businesses that have a person who is both the boss and the worker and who is keen to put himself or herself forward for a more active role in the community. How could they do that? I think that remuneration—which would include caring costs—could be part of the approach, but more is needed than just caring costs. Some people might be encouraged to come forward by them and people who are already in councils could take advantage of them, but there might not necessarily be a huge impact on widening access.

Susan Love: We have no evidence that care costs are the main reason why women in particular are not putting themselves forward for council membership. In fact, there is a problem for anyone with care responsibilities who wants to stand for council. We have not yet managed to tie that issue down.

As far as support for councillors is concerned, we have vaguely discussed the role of the council as an employer. What are the council's responsibilities to councillors? How much should councillors be provided with? We will probably discuss the matter further and do not yet have any final recommendations.

Marlyn Glen: That is interesting, because evidence that we received suggested that care costs could be subsidised directly or included as a separate package in addition to remuneration.

Rowena Arshad: The point is that becoming a councillor should enhance people's lives, not be a financial detriment.

Mrs Milne: I was interested to hear that the witnesses are going to Aberdeen. Before I left Aberdeen City Council, there had been some discussion about support for councillors across the range of issues that have been raised this morning. I hope that that visit will provide some interesting information.

Marlyn Glen: Does the group have a view on the kinds of training that will make an impact on widening access? We have already talked about the culture within political parties and councils. To what extent do you feel that equal opportunities training and awareness raising for elected

members is likely to make a positive impact in that respect?

Rowena Arshad: Training is an interesting subject. To start with, we are trying to get to grips with the areas where there are gaps. Political parties and councils provide certain training, of which equal opportunities forms a part, and we are trying to find out what one thinks the other is providing. Clearly, an independent councillor will be dependent on a council's training provision.

We also need to put equal opportunities higher up council agendas. All the officers to whom we have spoken have said that councillors are so pressed for time that their presence at training can be hit or miss. As a result, we recommend that equality issues form part of any training—no matter whether it refers to child protection guidelines, planning permissions or whatever—to ensure that we are not dependent on having a specific equal opportunities training slot. I am not quite sure that we have received all the necessary evidence on that matter; we will probably have to go back and ask councils about it.

Susan Love: The official training that political parties and councils provide for candidates and newly elected or existing councillors is critical, because from what we have seen so far there appear to be very few links in that respect between the parties and the councils. The situation appears to be totally hit or miss.

Marlyn Glen: That would be a good issue to follow up in Aberdeen.

The committee has also received evidence that various forms of training should be aimed at under-represented groups as well as at councillors. For example, pupils could job shadow councillors and pre-election induction programmes could be introduced for all members of the community. Has the group received much evidence about that type of activity? Would any types of training be particularly helpful in removing barriers to participation?

Rowena Arshad: We have not yet received a huge amount of evidence on that matter. Indeed, none of the political parties that we have contacted has mentioned job shadowing as a means of widening access or removing barriers. That suggestion is quite useful.

As far as community groups are concerned, the issue is as much about information as it is about training. As we said earlier, people do not seem to be very clued up about what councillors do. We have to encourage the provision of educational packages that help advice agencies, people who advise communities and people who are gatekeepers to explain to members of the public which issues they should take to their local councillor and not to their MSP.

12:00

Susan Love: I should have mentioned another training issue, which comes from the political-party side. We hear from many councillors that they did not know what they were letting themselves in for when they stood for election. There is a strong impression that, if the political parties train their candidates, there will be no more candidates, because people will know what the job involves and that will scare them off. That may be another reason why the parties are not keen to give it all away to their candidates.

Shiona Baird: My first question concerns length of service as a barrier. The committee noted in its report to the Local Government and Transport Committee that setting an upper limit of service could be examined in relation to encouraging wider representation and diversity. Has the group examined that and formed a view?

Rowena Arshad: We have not looked at length of service.

Susan Love: I am scribbling it down.

Rowena Arshad: We are both scribbling it down right now.

A balance has to be struck between length of service and the lead-in time of several years that is required to increase one's knowledge base and confidence. Someone thought that a covert purpose of the group was to remove white middle-aged men. We had to say that that is not the remit of the group. There is a balance to be struck between length of service and someone becoming so ingrained that they are out of touch with the issues on the ground. We will look at that matter.

Shiona Baird: My next question concerns the media. As new members, some of us have been the subject of a little bit of criticism and satirical nonsense in the past few days. The committee has heard evidence that has highlighted the fact that the media have a significant role to play in forming attitudes and affecting the willingness of under-represented groups to come forward and stand for election. Has that issue come to your attention? To what extent have you been able to engage with the media as part of your consideration of the issues?

Rowena Arshad: We have not directly engaged with any elements of the media, although it would be interesting to take evidence from them. We have concentrated our evidence sessions on community groups, on current and previously elected members and on political parties. The media have not been in the frame, but there is no reason why they should not be.

I gave the example of someone who is gay or lesbian standing for election as a member of a political party. In that situation, the media can have

a negative or positive role. Someone mentioned the powerful role of the media and how it could make people think twice, especially if their political party had not thought through how it was going to cope with the media. We can go back to political parties and ask them how their media offices deal with negative press and whether they have thought about how they would deal with the media on behalf of their members.

Shiona Baird: I would go further and challenge the media pundits themselves, asking them what they think that they are achieving with some of the negative publicity.

Rowena Arshad: Absolutely. We will do that.

Ms White: We are talking about councils and the media. COSLA is the big umbrella group for all councils. I know that COSLA has relations with the media. Has the group thought about approaching COSLA to ask whether it has a group that puts out positive messages about councils and councillors? Asking COSLA to take a leading role might be a way of upping the ante in a positive way.

Rowena Arshad: That is a good suggestion. Corrie McChord, who sits on the progress group, has links to COSLA. I would have thought that COSLA has machinery to ensure that the press profile is positive. I am sure that work is being done on that. Shiona Baird is right about pinning down people in the media to take more responsibility, but that applies not just to this area, but to a range of areas of negative reporting, such as on asylum seekers.

The Convener: Much of what we have heard this morning has been about issues that people have been discussing for a long time. We know what the Kerley report says, for example. How do we ensure that your recommendations do not end up in a cupboard somewhere? How do we ensure that progress is made and how can the committee support the review that is under way?

Rowena Arshad: It would be helpful to present the completed report to the committee, flesh out the points and gain support for them. It would also help to stress the points to ministers. We are all keen not to produce a vague report. When issues are raised, we should point them out. That is one way of pinning people down. We could also ask for progress to be made on the Kerley report. We could ask what has happened and where the gaps are. We might be able to tie in the evidence to show us why gaps continue to exist. We could present the report—perhaps in person—for the committee's consideration.

The Convener: I see from the nodding heads that members would welcome the opportunity to discuss the report. Are there any glaring issues that we have missed this morning in our questioning that you would like to raise?

Rowena Arshad: No. You have been thorough and wide ranging in your questions. You have also given us three or four leads to follow up—for example, on length of service, on the media and work with COSLA, and on rural-urban issues. We have thought about some of those issues, but we will seek further views on them. Thank you for that.

The Convener: Thank you for your evidence this morning. I am sure that I speak for the committee when I wish you well in your further evidence taking.

12:07

Meeting continued in private until 12:19.

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