

EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE

Tuesday 27 September 2005

Session 2

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EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE

13th Meeting 2005, Session 2

CONVENER

*Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

Nora Radcliffe (Gordon) (LD)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Frances Curran (West of Scotland) (SSP)

*Marlyn Glen (North East Scotland) (Lab)

Marilyn Livingstone (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)

Mr Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

Elaine Smith (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)

*John Swinburne (Central Scotland) (SSCUP)

*Ms Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP)

COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTES

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab)

Linda Fabiani (Central Scotland) (SNP)

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green)

Carolyn Leckie (Central Scotland) (SSP)

*attended

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Steve Farrell

SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

Zoé Tough

ASSISTANT CLERK

Roy McMahon

LOCATION

Committee Room 5

Scottish Parliament

Equal Opportunities Committee

Tuesday 27 September 2005

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 10:02*]

Disability Inquiry

The Convener (Cathy Peattie): Good morning, everyone, and welcome to the 13th meeting in 2005 of the Equal Opportunities Committee. I remind all present to turn off their mobile phones.

We have received apologies from Jamie McGrigor, Elaine Smith, Nora Radcliffe and Marilyn Livingstone.

Agenda item 1 concerns the committee's approach to phase 2 of our disability inquiry. The approach paper before us identifies the key themes that emerged from our phase 1 evidence taking and recommends possible approaches to our phase 2 evidence taking. Does any member have a general comment to make on the paper?

John Swinburne (Central Scotland) (SSCUP): Just that I read it all before; I can read it all again, but I have no problem with it.

Ms Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP): It is a very good paper, particularly the section in which the issue of employers and disability awareness is addressed. I spoke to some people at the weekend—social workers and people who work in the voluntary sector—who, I understand, also spoke to you on the matter, convener. They mentioned the importance of disability awareness training for employers.

Will you go through the paper? I have a couple of specific comments to make.

The Convener: Yes. We will work through it.

Marlyn Glen (North East Scotland) (Lab): As a general comment, I like the suggested approach of highlighting good practice in phase 2. Instead of just pointing out problems, we should highlight good practice so that other people can take note of and emulate it.

The Convener: It is a very good paper. It reminds us of the evidence that we heard and have lived with over the past year. It is good to see it in print.

I ask Sandra White to run through her other comments.

Ms White: My first comment relates to disability awareness training, which is mentioned in

paragraph 20. The recommendation that we are asked to consider is a good one.

Paragraph 23 highlights the part that benefits play in accessing work in the labour market. Benefits are also linked to the subject of paragraph 31, which is further and higher education. Benefits can have an effect on participation in the education system. [Interruption.] Am I going too fast, convener?

The Convener: No, you are fine.

Ms White: Perhaps we should look again at the issue of benefits when we consider further and higher education.

The Convener: Obviously, people raised the subject of benefits during phase 1. Although the issue is reserved, it is difficult for us to ignore. We will record the evidence that we take on the subject and ensure that Westminster ministers get the information, either formally or informally. If benefits are a barrier, we need to pick up on that. I am sorry for interrupting.

Ms White: No, you are right, convener. I just want to ensure that we mention benefits to the legislators, as they have a knock-on effect on access to education.

Paragraph 47, which concerns transport, says:

"The majority of transport legislation is reserved to the UK Parliament. Therefore, the Committee is limited in the scope it has to recommend action."

I had no objection to the Parliament agreeing to a Sewel motion on the Disability Discrimination Bill, because transport is one of the bill's priorities. However, we might want to mention that in the recommendation in paragraph 47.

The Convener: We have a wee bit to go in our inquiry. You are right, however: if people cannot get transport, it is difficult for them to participate in any of the areas that we are looking at in our inquiry.

Ms White: Some people from whom we took evidence, such as those from Capability Scotland, said that although they welcomed the bill, they would have preferred a separate Scottish Parliament bill, rather than the use of a Sewel motion to address issues such as the timescale for transport improvements. We should highlight that.

The Convener: We will take evidence on transport. That will give you the opportunity to raise those issues with Capability Scotland and with organisations that are involved in delivering transport. Notwithstanding the timescale for the implementation of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, we will need to look at the provision of transport and whether people in the organisations that are involved in delivering transport are aware of the needs of disabled people. We will return to

the issue. As you rightly said, wherever we went in our phase 1 evidence taking, we heard that transport is an issue. When we sit down to consider whom to invite to give evidence for phase 2, we will ensure that transport is covered.

Ms White: Thank you.

John Swinburne: As a latecomer to the committee, I am impressed with the way in which the committee keeps harping on about topics until such time as it becomes the norm for people out there to take it all on board in their everyday lives. Once that happens, we will have done our job.

The Convener: You are absolutely right. One of our tasks is to try to encourage people to do just that.

Marlyn Glen: I welcome the fact that we will continue to concentrate on transport. I have a couple of points on the subject of further and higher education. I repeat that it is a good idea to highlight best practice so that other people can pick up on it.

We should not miss the boat on a couple of changes that are coming into force. First, the Scottish Further Education Funding Council and the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council are merging into a new council. We should pick up on what the funding situation will be like, rather than just talk about what it was like.

Secondly, the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004 comes into force in November. We should not presume that that legislation will be an improvement in itself without first taking a look at it. There are still a number of issues for us to pick up on in that regard. However, generally speaking, the paper covers everything really well.

The Convener: I had an opportunity to speak to the funding councils separately, but we need to take on board what you said. Members will remember that we visited colleges and universities and looked at provision, but there are still issues to consider, such as how funding can follow disabled students. I agree with your final point on the 2004 act. It is fine having policies, but we need to know about what happens in practice.

Are members happy to publish the summary of evidence on the inquiry web page, so that people can read the information?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: Members have raised issues that they want to explore during phase 2. Are there any further issues that members want to deal with during oral evidence-taking sessions?

Ms White: I suggest the further education issue, to which Marlyn Glen referred. I also like what the paper says about "pretendy" courses. That issue is

important. The paper recommends that we should take evidence from colleges about their courses, and I am happy with that.

The Convener: Are members happy with the recommendations?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: Are members happy with the proposed timescale for phase 2?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: Are members happy that the clerks and I select witnesses to give oral evidence for phase 2?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: An issue has arisen about supported employment. When someone with a disability leaves school or goes to college, their life changes and their expectation that they will get employment often seems to go out the window. We have looked at examples of good practice in supported employment. In addition, we heard from Mike Evans at our away day and we visited Dundee to see what was happening there.

There are examples of good practice in supported employment in Norway, and I suggest that we make a fact-finding trip there to look at them. That would involve two members and a clerk visiting Norway and looking at projects and other work there. Given the emphasis on encouraging disabled people into work, we must consider examples of good practice in that area. We have seen some examples of good practice, but we have also heard of unacceptable approaches to supported employment. What are members' views on the proposed fact-finding trip?

Ms White: It is an excellent idea to look at how other countries and other areas overcome the kind of difficulties that we are also facing. That is not to say that practices in other countries are perfect, but we can learn from one other. We could learn a lot from the proposed trip, and I support it.

The Convener: It would be a worthwhile visit. We will leave till later consideration of who will go.

Budget Process 2006-07

10:12

The Convener: Item 2 is on the budget process 2006-07. Have members any comments on the briefing paper?

John Swinburne: I sat on the Finance Committee when it was discussing the budget. If we are fortunate enough to have the minister in front of us at a meeting, I will take up the issue of lifelong learning with him, in the context of the agist policy of not paying a grant to a person who is over 65. The minister promised to look into that. If he gives evidence to us, I will ensure that he has followed through with that.

The Convener: We will be able to take evidence from the Minister for Communities.

Marlyn Glen: It is important that the committee continues to push for measurable equality targets. If we do not do that, the targets will remain small scale and low level. Following Professor Arthur Midwinter's proposals, we must push the targets issue up the agenda. There is a reluctance to engage with the issue. We all back off it because it is about finance, but we should not do that. We should get our head around it and keep pushing.

John Swinburne: The finance aspect is easy.

Marlyn Glen: It is good that we now have a previous member of the Finance Committee on the Equal Opportunities Committee.

The Convener: It is good to have written policies and good intentions, but we must have an audit to check whether equality policies are working and making a difference. We must continue to push that issue.

I agree that it is helpful to have a resident expert, who has been on the Finance Committee.

John Swinburne: I was just an onlooker.

The Convener: You will not be allowed to be an onlooker here; you will have to participate.

We will consider how to pursue the issue of equality audits.

Do members agree to take forward those issues in consideration of the draft budget?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: Do members agree to write to the equalities co-ordinating group and invite its views on the draft budget? It is important that we know the views of equalities organisations on the budget.

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: John Swinburne wants the minister to attend a meeting and we expect that the minister will give evidence on 1 November.

John Swinburne: Will that be Tavish Scott?

The Convener: No. It will be the Minister for Communities, given his responsibility for equalities issues. If he cannot answer any questions at the meeting, we can ask him to reply in writing.

Do members agree to consider a draft report on the budget at our meeting on 15 November?

Members indicated agreement.

Work Programme

10:15

The Convener: Item 3 is the work programme for the coming year. The draft programme was circulated to members. The main area is continuing with the disability inquiry. Are members happy with the programme?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: Thank you.

Meeting closed at 10:16.

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