

EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE

Tuesday 24 January 2006

Session 2

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EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE

2nd Meeting 2006, 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

Bill Aitken (Glasgow) (Con)

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab)

Ms Rosemary Byrne (South of Scotland) (SSP)

Linda Fabiani (Central Scotland) (SNP)

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING GAVE EVIDENCE:

Joe Dow d (Scottish Executive Enterprise, Transport and Lifelong Learning Department)

Yvonne Strachan (Scottish Executive Development Department)

Allan Wilson (Deputy Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Steve Farrell

SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

Zoé Tough

ASSISTANT CLERK

Roy McMahon

LOCATION

Committee Room 4

Scottish Parliament

Equal Opportunities Committee

Tuesday 24 January 2006

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 11:02*]

Disability Inquiry

The Convener (Cathy Peattie): Good morning and welcome to the second meeting in 2006 of the Equal Opportunities Committee. I have received apologies from Jamie McGrigor and Sandra White.

In today's meeting, the committee will take evidence for its disability inquiry. This is our fourth formal oral evidence-taking session on the theme of work.

I am pleased to welcome the Deputy Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning, Allan Wilson; Yvonne Strachan, who is from the Scottish Executive Development Department's equality unit; and Joe Dowd, who is from the Scottish Executive Enterprise, Transport and Lifelong Learning Department. I invite the minister to make some introductory remarks before we ask questions.

The Deputy Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning (Allan Wilson): Thank you, convener—it is a pleasure to be here. I do not think that I have previously been in front of the Equal Opportunities Committee. It is good to have an opportunity to contribute in some small way to the committee's inquiry, which is on an important subject.

I will be brief. We want to play our full part in helping the committee in its deliberations and in helping it to reach the right conclusions. Obviously, we want disadvantaged people in general to be given more opportunities, and we especially want disabled people to be given the opportunity to flourish. Employment is the principal means by which we hope that those aims can be achieved. The provision of such opportunities is good not only for disabled people, but for growing businesses, for our economy and—more generally—for improving our prosperity.

Members will know that a considerable part of the responsibility for helping disabled people to access work is reserved to the United Kingdom Government. That has implications for how resources are divided between that Government and the Executive, but I am happy to consider what we can do to contribute to employment opportunities for disabled people. We are doing a lot of good work in that context. Obviously, much of it is done through education and training to

provide the skills that get people back into the labour market. However, I understand that the committee will focus on that in a later meeting.

The Convener: Yes.

Allan Wilson: There are a number of other ways in which we can help disadvantaged people, including the disabled, into employment. That can be done not only through economic development and working with employers—important though that approach is—but through policy making across the Executive. That approach includes our health and communities colleagues.

There are complex relationships among various employment-related agencies at Scotland and United Kingdom levels. Recently, I have been spending an awful lot of time developing the so-called employability framework. We spend considerable public money on this and I want to ensure that it is spent as well as it can be and that there is a co-ordinated approach at national and local levels so that we provide the most effective support to help people, through employment, to transform their lives and their opportunities.

The framework will be published in the next few weeks, so this is an opportune moment to talk about the emerging conclusions and how the thinking is developing. Obviously, final decisions have still to be made, so I will have to be slightly circumspect in relation to some of the committee's questions. That is a good thing, however, because the committee will be inputting directly to the process. If there are any questions that I cannot answer, I will write to the committee. I am ably supported by Joe Dowd and Yvonne Strachan, who are well known to members.

If anything is raised today that is not covered in the framework, I will take the opportunity to go back and revise the framework. Furthermore, when you report on your findings, we will have an opportunity to discuss the two pieces of work in parallel. When the employability framework is concluded, it will not be written in tablets of stone; rather, it will be a work in progress. There is currently a lot of work in progress and, when it is published, the framework will take that forward. There will still, however, be more to do.

I hope that I have given the committee some idea of where we are in the process. I am happy to answer questions.

The Convener: We are aware that a number of the issues that we are considering are reserved. However, there are a number of things that the Executive and others can do to remove barriers that people face in accessing employment. I am interested in how the Scottish Executive's equality strategy is being applied by the Executive and its agencies to support disabled people into work.

Allan Wilson: The employability framework will be the principal, but not the only, mechanism. Obviously, work goes on in the communities portfolio and the health portfolio. As I said, I have been at pains to ensure that the cross-cutting agenda operates effectively and that colleagues in those portfolio areas contribute to the development of policy and, critically, to delivery. The framework will focus to a great extent on delivery mechanisms and there are general principles that will drive the process forward. Those principles have been developed through widespread consultation of stakeholders including disadvantaged groups, such as people who are furthest from the labour market and who need most assistance, and those who are close to the labour markets and might not need as much assistance but who have demonstrated willingness and a desire to work.

One of the driving principles is that we should view people as individuals—we accept that different obstacles confront different people. Some people might experience multiple obstacles to their getting back into the labour market, so it is important that the delivery mechanisms that we set up are local, flexible and tailored to the individual.

In the context of disabled people, that means that we must focus on their needs and particular obstacles, and that we must ensure that all the agencies are working towards meeting that individual's needs. It is to be hoped that the most important thing that will come out of the employability framework is that all the partners in the process—local authorities, enterprise networks, Communities Scotland or our partners in the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, the Department of Work and Pensions and Jobcentre Plus—will work together flexibly in a co-ordinated and co-operative fashion to deliver for individual disabled people.

The Convener: I agree with all that and I like what you are saying. You mentioned that a lot of money is being spent; that is welcome.

What mechanisms will be put in place to ensure that all the stakeholders—especially those at whom the employability framework is targeted—will benefit? We have heard that many agencies give a good talk, but when we start to pick off some of the layers, the good talk is not necessarily as meaningful for the people at whom those agencies target services. What monitoring and evaluation will be put in place to measure the experience of disabled people?

Allan Wilson: As you know, a range of programmes is currently in place. Some are more successful than others and some are more tailored to individual needs than others are. Through the partnership framework that we intend to introduce,

all parties should bring to the table their own programmes and should develop those locally and flexibly, with one organisation acting as the lead—which organisation it is will depend on prevailing local circumstances—to ensure that services are tailored to local and individual needs and that they are monitored locally.

It is not possible for me, sitting in Edinburgh, or for us collectively, to do that job. The employability framework must be delivered locally in partnership with responsive local people who work at the grass roots so that there is a genuine response to the needs of individuals. I do not think that that can be delivered from the centre, although colleagues might disagree. The framework has to be delivered locally in order for it to be effective and genuinely responsive.

Above the local level, it is important that we take a strategic overview of the effectiveness of the operation; it is also important that others do so. We have also, as is appropriate, to monitor the scheme's effectiveness. There will be a national structure that is not far removed from our national setup for the equality strategy; a national group will oversee the effectiveness of the employability framework at local level. There is also a bottom-up process whereby people at the local level can feed into the national group and vice versa. If one local group is not as effective as another, the national group could influence that.

Some really good stuff is being done in Glasgow and Dundee, in other city partnerships and in other areas. Real inroads are being made into the more intractable problems.

The Convener: The Committee notes the Scottish Administration's employment targets for disabled staff. What plans does the Executive have to set targets for other public sector areas, in light of the evidence we have heard from North Lanarkshire Council, Reed in Partnership, the employers forum on disability and the Federation of Small Businesses, which says that the public sector recruitment process is a barrier to disabled people accessing work?

11:15

Allan Wilson: There will be targets in the employability framework when it is produced, although I will not quantify them today. They will attempt to address the problem by closing the gaps in opportunity areas that we see as being priorities. It is important that public sector procurement activity take account of the wider agenda of providing for disabled people increased opportunity to access employment. Large employers, such as the health service and local government, differ in their approaches, but they have critical roles in public sector procurement, so

their procurement policies must be equality-proofed. Beyond that, they have to be positively discriminatory. Can that term still be used?

The Convener: No.

Allan Wilson: Such bodies have to be proactive in their approach. It is not enough simply to have the approach on paper—they must engage in providing better employment opportunities to the people who have been left behind but who want such opportunities. Although I accept that there are good employers in this regard, more can be done by the sector in employer engagement and in ensuring that the process succeeds. Everyone must be engaged in the process. The Scottish Executive must be an exemplar of good practice by ensuring that our house is in order and that the right strategies and processes are in place.

Marilyn Livingstone (Kirkcaldy) (Lab): When we took evidence on 15 November, a representative from Scottish Enterprise admitted:

“The equality strategy is probably not our ... guiding light; that is more ‘A Smart, Successful Scotland’.”—[*Official Report, Equal Opportunities Committee*, 15 November 2005; c 1231.]

In the light of that remark, how is it envisaged that the smart, successful Scotland policy will assist disabled people in finding and maintaining employment?

Allan Wilson: Scottish Enterprise is crucial to successful delivery of the employability of disabled persons. It is important that it is not only engaged in growing the economy, but in providing employment opportunities for people who can create wealth and share in increased prosperity. That means it must adopt an inclusive strategy.

SE has established an equality team to drive that agenda. Whenever I meet Scottish Enterprise, I impress on its representatives the importance of skills training and workforce development and I try to ensure that it is not focused purely on global connectivity. SE must be focused on the bread-and-butter issues of providing skills training, workforce development and ensuring that employment opportunities are made available. To that effect, the partnership accord with the DWP, Jobcentre Plus and COSLA will be extended to incorporate Communities Scotland, the national health service and Scottish Enterprise. In the future, there should be no dysfunction and everyone should be singing from the same hymn sheet. We are all committed to providing improved employment opportunities.

Marilyn Livingstone: I am really pleased by that answer.

The aim of the fresh talent initiative is to get workers into Scotland. However, in its evidence, the Institute of Directors said that disabled people

form a large but untapped resource; indeed, they are a “reserve army of labour”, which is being under-utilised. You covered some aspects of local flexibility and tailoring courses to individual needs in response to the convener’s earlier questions. Disabled people across the country have said that training has sometimes been too specific, that the 12-week programme is not long enough and that they have had to fit into boxes. They are worried that things are very target driven; although they understand the need to have targets, they want more local solutions and much more flexibility. Will the employability framework address all those issues?

Allan Wilson: Yes—I can give some reassurance on that. I am not surprised to hear that disabled people have made such comments to the committee; that matches the evidence that we have received from the work streams and our various consultations. As I said at the beginning, we will produce individually tailored solutions to ensure that we do not fit people into pre-ordained boxes.

However, I must point out that various partners spend an awful lot of money on getting people ready for employment. Unlike the Institute of Directors, I do not think that there is a vast pool of underutilised labour. Rather, there are many individuals who have individual needs and particular obstacles to overcome so that they can get back into the labour market. In some cases, people face multiple obstacles—that can be quite a difficult client group. As a result, people need to pull together locally, to think out of the box and to tailor solutions to individual needs. That means that, sooner rather than later, personnel and financial resources will have to be pooled. However, in the short-to-medium term, we must have a structure that is flexible enough locally to deliver individually tailored solutions. In any case, doing things the other way is no longer acceptable.

Marilyn Livingstone: Again, I am really pleased by that response on one of the most important issues that we have to deal with.

When we took evidence on how we can get disabled people into work, the Federation of Small Businesses said that Scottish Enterprise

“is a body that will sit at a distance ... and will not make direct contact with ... disabled people who are looking for work.”—[*Official Report, Equal Opportunities Committee*, 10 January 2006; c 1334.]

One challenge that faces the Executive—and, indeed, which faces you, minister—is to ensure that Scottish Enterprise and Highlands and Islands Enterprise do more to assist employers to employ disabled people, and more to help them into work or to start their own businesses. What is your response to the criticism that although Scottish

Enterprise is, as you have said, certainly involved in business and economic development, it has been very distant with regard to community development?

Allan Wilson: I get the impression that that feeling is not unique to disabled organisations. Other organisations that work with groups of disadvantaged people who are furthest from the labour market have expressed similar concerns about the economic development agencies' not taking as seriously as they might the job of re-equipping people for re-entering the labour market.

The reason why I took new futures funding from Scottish Enterprise and gave it to local partnerships was that I felt that the partnerships were more focused on the agenda and would be better able to deliver it. We need focus, commitment and engagement, and I believe that you get those things locally. It need not always be the local authority that is involved. It could be Jobcentre Plus or other partners in the process that take the lead in any individual circumstance, but whoever takes the lead must be focused and committed.

I know that the equality unit at Scottish Enterprise is focused and committed and that it understands the importance of raising awareness, particularly among employers, of the opportunities that exist for employing people who are currently economically inactive. However, we have to do more, and the people in the Scottish Enterprise equality unit have to do more—I suspect that they would be the first to admit that. They are currently involved in training their staff to go out and raise awareness. I fully concede that there is more to be done on that front. The employability framework was published as the start of a process, not the end of a journey.

The Convener: It is worth noting that the Federation of Small Businesses thinks that Scottish Enterprise is remote from small business, which is an issue.

John Swinburne (Central Scotland) (SSCUP): The Scottish Enterprise set-up is such that it can be difficult enough for an able-bodied and fit person to get access to assistance. I have been there; I can assure you that it is a difficult process. Is there any extra funding that could be targeted specifically at the delicate and sensitive area of encouraging people who have disabilities to start up on their own? Many such people would feel more comfortable if they could be their own boss and could set targets that they could meet. It would give them greater confidence than would working for someone else. Self-employment, with the help of Scottish Enterprise, might be the best way of getting as many people as possible into employment.

Allan Wilson: There will be additional funding attached to delivering the employability framework and the NEET—not in education, employment or training—strategy. That will be targeted at the areas of greatest need, in accordance with our closing the opportunity gap strategy, in addition to the considerable sums of money—in excess of £500 million—that have already been spent on that. It is a matter of focusing activity and funding so that it responds better to the needs of individuals. Whether the money goes directly to Scottish Enterprise is a moot point; it may be that we can find ways of spending the money more effectively elsewhere.

Scottish Enterprise has a scheme called business able, which is directed at helping disabled people to set up their own businesses. A marketing team will be established this year to research the barriers that disabled people face in accessing services and to consider how to target resources more effectively. Money will be spent on researching those barriers and providing solutions. My ambition is to ensure that, regardless of where people live—whether they live in Lanarkshire or elsewhere—there will be specialists working in committed and focused partnerships who can respond to their needs consistently in order to provide the advice, guidance, support and assistance that they need.

John Swinburne: In a target-oriented society, Scottish Enterprise will be looking for the best results from the least input of their allocation of money. Given that the cost of getting a disabled person into employment—which Scottish Enterprise does not always get full credit for doing—is high, is there a way of shifting the balance a bit more in favour of disabled people who seek self-employment?

11:30

Allan Wilson: We take account of that. It costs more to bring the people who are furthest away from the labour market back into it. They could be disabled people, people with a history of alcohol or drug abuse or homeless people—a range of disadvantages are involved. We recognise that the costs of recruiting and providing interventions for those groups of people are higher and that the success rate is lower and we take account of those factors in our target setting.

I take the point that the convener made. We monitor the effectiveness of the process to see that we are getting value for money. That is partly what the new futures fund is about. Fairly liberal targets were set for the outcomes of that fund and the cost of achieving them. New futures fund projects are tailored for people who have the most problems or obstacles to overcome. We take account of that in the allocations that we make.

Marlyn Glen (North East Scotland) (Lab): I welcome the minister's enthusiasm for furthering equalities in the enterprise sector, which we need to do. In its submission, Remploy said:

"Government statistics show there are nearly 290,000 disabled people on Incapacity Benefit in Scotland, with over 190,000 wanting to work. Remploy placed more than three times as many people into work under the Workstep programme as all the other providers put together."

Another colleague will raise the issue of outcome-focused targets. My question is on the message that the Government is giving out.

In that regard, the Disability Rights Commission in Scotland stated in its submission:

"more needs to be done to underpin the centrality of equality of opportunity to Scotland's future economic success."

Other written evidence called for strategic leadership on the employment of disabled people. What is the Executive's intention in putting forward an effective strategic message on the employment of disabled people?

Allan Wilson: The question is not only important but topical, given that the welfare reform green paper is being published today at Westminster. Obviously, we have been working closely on the issue with the DWP, Jobcentre Plus and others over a long period of time. Our intention is to ensure that the message that comes across is that, yes, we support the reform of the benefits system, but its purpose is to encourage and support more people back into the labour market. That is critical.

In previous years, people were encouraged to think that people on incapacity benefit were on it for the rest of their existence. That need not be the way it is—certainly, it should not be that way. It should not be said that individuals on incapacity benefit will never again be fit for work. As the Remploy evidence shows, 190,000 people who are on incapacity benefit have expressed an interest in getting back into the labour market, and they need support and assistance.

The message that should come out of all this is that the purpose of the exercise is to provide the support and assistance that will give people the opportunity to get back into the labour market and to share in the growing prosperity that has been created in this country. In the past, too many people were left behind; tackling that also comes under our wider regeneration strategy.

Marlyn Glen: Thank you.

The committee has noted the various recommendations that have been made in the many pieces of Scottish Executive research on the subject, including "Transitions to Employment: Advising Disadvantaged Groups"; "Investigation of

Access to Public Services in Scotland Using British Sign Language"; "Disability and Employment in Scotland: A Review of the Evidence Base"; and "Go for it!: Supporting People with Learning Disabilities and/or Autistic Spectrum Disorders in Employment". How are the recommendations in those reports informing policy decisions? Have you any specific examples of their implementation?

Allan Wilson: Yes. I know that there are many reports, because I have briefings on them all. I could give several examples, but I will pick one report—"Go for it!: Supporting People with Learning Disabilities and/or Autistic Spectrum Disorders in Employment"—because I have been anxious to ensure that our employability framework takes on board the lessons that we have learned from organisations such as Enable Scotland. I met Norman Dunning before Christmas in a constituency that neighbours mine and discussed with him Enable's programmes with private sector employers such as Tesco or, in the public sector, with local government to help people with learning disabilities into the labour market and to give them opportunities when they might have had none.

My job is to ensure that all the reports, all the research findings and all the work that has been done in the work streams that have contributed to the employability framework are incorporated and that the lessons that have been learned are replicated. Good practice should be rolled out, so that more people have opportunities. Programmes and policies do not always work, so we should concentrate on what does work. That will be done within the framework of local delivery, partnership working and individually tailored solutions.

Marlyn Glen: Examples of implementation would be useful for the committee's report.

Allan Wilson: Yes. "Working for a change? The same as you? National Implementation Group Report of the short-life working group on Employment" provides an example, but there are many examples of transitions. Many examples are in the work stream reports, which have all been published and which will inform the employability framework.

Elaine Smith (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab): In replying to Marlyn Glen, you talked about the Government's review of benefits and about the underlying principle of encouraging and supporting people into the labour market. We all agree that that aim is laudable and we all agree with the principle, but some of us may have serious concerns about processes. Our inquiry has shown that people have problems and that people with disability face barriers to entering the labour market. Will you give us your view on the media reports, which are perhaps exaggerated, that

general practitioners will be offered bonuses, for example? That conjures up images of a blame culture and of skivers, whereas we are finding that a huge number of people would like to access the workplace but encounter many barriers. Perceptions and attitudes are important to our inquiry and such reports do not help.

Allan Wilson: I could not agree more. I have watched events unfold and I do not recognise much of the media comment on what is proposed. What has been practised in the pilot schemes, such as pathways to work, has been tremendously successful. In its piloted areas in Renfrewshire, pathways to work has been tremendously successful at incentivising the return to work of incapacity benefit claimants and those who have been economically inactive. The programme has been extended into Glasgow, where it has also been tremendously successful at incentivising the process.

We must await publication of the green paper for analysis of what is proposed, but I think that GPs have a positive role to play. If we can bring together the health service, the benefits service and Jobcentre Plus in the confines of a GP's surgery—as we have under the pilot programme, to the individual's benefit—I do not see why we should not do that. People are entitled to get all the advice and support that public agencies can provide. It would not be helpful for GPs somehow to set themselves apart.

We must ensure that all the agencies work together and that the emphasis is on encouraging and supporting individuals and incentivising the process of getting back to work. The so-called poverty trap is problematic for people, but we all know that employment is the route out of poverty. If we give people employment opportunities, we will reduce the number of people who live in poverty.

Elaine Smith: Therefore, it is a question of opportunities. We have had evidence that the pathways to work programme is a good scheme. However, the National Autistic Society, which runs an employment service called Prospects, told us that it hopes that the committee will recognise that not everybody with a disability can work and that some people need to access benefits to help them to have a good quality of life. Clearly, the National Autistic Society wants to encourage people to work, particularly those with autism. In Britain, only 6 per cent of people on the spectrum are in employment, which is a worrying figure.

You mentioned cross cutting. We find that, when we talk about disability, we get into reserved areas, but there are cross-cutting issues. I seek reassurance that there is liaison and that the Scottish Government has input to the review.

Allan Wilson: We have been working closely with the UK Government. It is important also to consider the other side of the coin. The emphasis has been on so-called sanctions in the new system for people who are not prepared to attend job interviews or to demonstrate in other ways a willingness to engage in employment, but the most severely disabled, who do not have an immediate or even a long-term prospect of returning to employment, will get higher benefits. It is important that that is mentioned in public forums such as the committee.

I assure you that we engage constantly and directly with our colleagues at the DWP on this joint agenda. Many thousands of our fellow citizens in Glasgow and Renfrewshire are benefiting from the pathways to work programme, which is encouraging.

Elaine Smith: That is right. Attitudes are important, but we hear a lot about the barriers to work. We hear criticism of the support that is available to help people to prepare for employment, get employment and maintain employment. Professor Sheila Riddell told the committee that there is duplication of effort and Ann Marshall from Jobcentre Plus said that there is a lot of parallel provision. Do you propose to examine and resolve those concerns?

Allan Wilson: There is duplication and there will undoubtedly be replication as well. The thrust of what we are doing is to reduce if not eradicate duplication and replication of effort in the partnerships that we are introducing. When our proposals are published, you will have an opportunity to consider them. We seek to ensure that services are delivered by the organisations and individuals that are best placed to do so, that individual need is accommodated within the process, and that the system is flexible enough at the local level to deliver that outcome. We will work locally through a partnership approach, and all the agencies—Jobcentre Plus, local authorities, economic development agencies, the private sector and, critically, the voluntary sector—will come together to share experience and roll out best practice. Dispensing with duplication and replication is part of what we propose.

Elaine Smith: It is clear from all the agencies that you mentioned that supported employment comes in different forms and is funded in different ways. Capability Scotland and the Royal National Institute for the Blind have told us that the fact that funding has tended to be output driven has prevented the adoption of a more person-centred and holistic approach. How could the support that is provided be made more person centred?

11:45

Allan Wilson: To an extent, I am repeating myself, but I make it clear that our driving principle is that the outcome should be centred on the individual and tailored to that person's needs, so that if different agencies are involved in providing support, the agency or scheme that is best placed to help will be brought to bear. There will be specialist workers whose job it is to ensure that that happens.

Elaine Smith: That is helpful.

Nora Radcliffe (Gordon) (LD): In your answers to other questions, minister, you picked up many of the issues that I wanted to ask about and have said that the employability framework will deal with them. How does that fit with the suggestion that there should be a Scottish national framework, with national standards, that would be delivered locally and would support disabled people into employment and sustain them in it? An issue that has not been covered, but which I am sure the employability framework will deal with, is the provision of support to stay in employment to people who acquire a disability or an impairment, or who already have a disability and whose condition worsens while they are in work. Will the employability framework fit into that sort of template and will it help to overcome some of the duplication that has been mentioned?

Allan Wilson: You make an important point, and I agree whole-heartedly with you on the specific example that you cited. The purpose of the employability framework is not to get people back into the labour market and then to abandon them; it is to get them into employment and then to provide them with support for 18 months or longer, so that that employment is sustainable.

From a workforce development point of view, we must take account of the fact that too many people work in low-paid jobs. It is vital that we provide them with the wherewithal to improve their skills and to progress in their careers so that they can get better jobs with better pay. We will not help people and then say, "Right. You've got a job, so you're on your own now." The purpose of the framework will be to ensure that all the agencies work hard with local employers to ensure that the right training opportunities are available for people to upgrade their skills and move on. We are not talking only about low-entry, low-grade and low-paid jobs. We want to ensure that people have the opportunity to progress once they are in employment. If someone comes into the health service or the public service at a certain level, they must be given the chance to progress to the next level. Indeed, there is an argument for bringing them in at that next level, but that is another matter.

Nora Radcliffe: What about people who are in work who might be involved in a road traffic accident, suffer a stroke or become ill in another way? They have not been specifically mentioned, but will they be included in the employability framework?

Allan Wilson: We have been working with the Health Department to ensure that we have a major input into "Healthy Working Lives: a plan for action", which acknowledges the important role that employment can play in improving a person's health by building up their confidence and self-esteem. That is particularly true of people who have mental health problems. We must tackle the stigma that is associated with such conditions and give people the opportunity to rehabilitate through employment. The beneficial impact that employment can have on health—especially on mental health—is important but all too often goes unrecognised.

Nora Radcliffe: Employers often have good intentions but are not sure where they can get the advice that they need to be supportive employers.

Allan Wilson: That is true of some employers. Unfortunately, others have not been as progressive as they might have been in that regard. The public sector has a duty to lead the way. We must get employer buy-in—the good employers need to lead the way, after which, I hope, others will follow suit.

John Swinburne: Written evidence from Deafblind Scotland and Quarriers suggests that disabled people often do not know where to go to access advice. One suggestion is that there should be a one-stop shop in each local authority area, where information on benefits, employment, child care and other services could be provided. How could the Executive make progress on that suggestion? What else could be done to assist disabled people to access information?

Allan Wilson: Advice, guidance, support and information are all important, not just for individuals but for employers, as was mentioned. I believe that we should have a one-stop shop for that advice and I want the partnerships that we are developing to provide that service as part of the process. That could be done at different levels. Doing it at the local authority area level should be considered, but it should certainly happen.

Frances Curran (West of Scotland) (SSP): Several committee members visited the RNIB residential training centre, which is a good facility. We were impressed by the centre, which provides a 12-week training course, but we were surprised to hear that Jobcentre Plus is by-passing the facility and sending blind and visually impaired people who live in Scotland to England for training. The reason is that the residential training unit in

England pays for a longer training period whereas, up here, Scottish Enterprise refuses to pay for that type of support. Will you review the situation?

Allan Wilson: I will have a look at it. I am aware of the background and history of residential training provision. I suppose that residential provision is residential whether it is in England or elsewhere, but we will have discussions on the future provision of residential training in Scotland in which we will take account of the available facilities, the demand for the service and our ability to meet the demand. The discussions will involve people from health boards, higher and further education, the enterprise networks and the DWP and Jobcentre Plus.

Frances Curran: Is there a timescale for that?

Allan Wilson: No. We will do it as soon as possible.

Frances Curran: I presume that you will contact those who provide the residential training.

Allan Wilson: We will.

Frances Curran: On a different issue, how does the Executive work in partnership with the UK Government and its agencies, Scottish local authorities and other service providers to provide services to support disabled people in accessing work? Can you give some examples of effective partnership?

Allan Wilson: As I said, the employability framework has been informed by the five work streams that we set up to engage employers and to get those in the field actively involved in developing the policy that follows from the framework. The capital city partnership in Edinburgh is a prime example of agencies working together to meet the needs of disabled people and other disadvantaged groups to help them into employment.

There are effective partnerships in each of the major cities. The objective is to extend those partnerships—concentrating them, in the first instance, in those areas where we particularly want to close the opportunity gap—so that, across the country, they work effectively for disabled people and other disadvantaged groups. The capital city partnership is a good example.

John Swinburne: How is Scottish Enterprise working with the UK Government to implement the recommendations on accessing employment that were made in the report of the Prime Minister's strategy unit "Improving the Life Chances of Disabled People"?

The Convener: You mean the Scottish Executive, rather than Scottish Enterprise.

John Swinburne: Yes. Sorry.

Allan Wilson: I understand that we have established a disability working group which, together with others, is developing policy. It has divided itself into sub-groups to consider specific areas, one of which is employment. They will be advising on the policy direction. That relates more to Yvonne Strachan's line of work, so I invite her to add to that.

Yvonne Strachan (Scottish Executive Development Department): The working group is indeed considering those areas, as the minister said. Issues to do with employment will form an integral part of that consideration and we hope to have a report published in the spring. The group's work is of course set in the context of the UK Government's report "Improving the Life Chances of Disabled People". There has been discussion with UK departments about how to progress from here.

Although the report was published last year, we are still at a relatively early stage of translating it into policy in Scotland. That is largely because the disability working group is currently considering the issues. We are also aware, of course, of the work that the committee is doing. In order to ensure that what we do in Scotland reflects that work, we want to have dialogue with our constituencies. We will be looking to take account of that in developing the Executive's response to the various pieces of work.

Marlyn Glen: We have heard that disabled people are not always aware of their rights under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 and that employers and service providers are not always aware of their responsibilities. For example, there is confusion over what "reasonable adjustment" means. Promotion of equalities is a devolved matter. How do you think that the Scottish Executive can work with employers and disabled people to promote a better understanding of the DDA?

Allan Wilson: It is a question of raising awareness, including awareness among individuals. I have dealt, in a way, with matters relating to employers. I would view the Scottish Enterprise equality unit's work in training its own staff as being a methodology with which it can go out and evangelise among employers about the need to make workplaces more disabled friendly and to ensure that disabled people's rights are recognised and adhered to.

I presume that the disability working group is considering how to engage with the public sector more generally and that it will be developing policy with a view to disseminating best practice more widely.

Yvonne Strachan: Yes, indeed. The working group will be working closely with the Disability

Rights Commission, which has a role here, and which has produced material that is currently being used in Scotland to encourage people to understand their responsibilities under the DDA, particularly in relation to employment.

The Convener: I do not think that the committee is confident that that is happening yet. We are quite disappointed about the role that agencies are playing. What could the Executive do to ensure that organisations such as Scottish Enterprise carry out their remit in this regard? The minister said that Scottish Enterprise could evangelise, but there is no evidence of its doing so.

12:00

Allan Wilson: I will certainly take that on board with organisations that come under my department's remit and will pass on your concerns to colleagues to ensure that their departments and their non-departmental public bodies are also aware of their obligations and are doing what they can to disseminate public policy. I do not think that there is a problem with the policy; the problem is with the dissemination of policy and practice.

Nora Radcliffe: The Executive is working with the Scottish Union for Supported Employment to produce a blueprint for supported employment in Scotland. Can you tell us a little bit more about that and about the timescale for it?

Allan Wilson: Joe Dowd could probably tell you more than I could.

Joe Dowd (Scottish Executive Enterprise, Transport and Lifelong Learning Department): We have commissioned the union to do some work for us, which we expect to be completed by the end of March. Supported employment has a key role in increasing the opportunities of disabled and disadvantaged people in getting back to work. However, until we see the report and have finalised the framework, we cannot say what its shape will be or what impact it will have. When we have the report at the end of March, we will be able to share our thoughts on it with the committee.

Nora Radcliffe: I look forward to seeing it and hope that it will provide an effective way forward.

The committee has been told in written evidence that the provision and uptake of direct payments have been a bit patchy. Direct payments represent an important opportunity for disabled people wishing to work to engage the services of a supported employment job coach directly. It does not appear that individuals who access direct payments are using those payments in that way. How can the Executive encourage people to use direct payments for employment support in a way that would enhance the independent living agenda?

Allan Wilson: We will develop that part of the agenda in our dialogue with the DWP over the piece, and the issue is also covered in the green paper that was published today. We had an input into the process in our recent discussions with Margaret Hodge in this building. We are talking about the city strategy, our employability framework and our ambitions to get X per cent of the economically inactive—including those who are claiming incapacity benefit—back into employment. We want to work on benefits more generally with the DWP to ensure that the system is incentivised to assist in that process, so that those who are in the greatest need get more support and those who want to get back into the labour market are encouraged to do that. Close co-operation and liaison in the partnerships that I have mentioned at a local level are required to ensure that the process works towards that objective. That could mean the pooling of resources. Although I have not yet seen the green paper, I know that the DWP is willing to look at resource pooling on a pilot basis. That has the potential to improve the situation for disabled people and others.

Nora Radcliffe: Is the Executive likely to undertake any initiatives to support the implementation of the disability equality duty?

Yvonne Strachan: The Executive will consider its responsibilities as an organisation, as it is obviously a key public sector body. The Executive is having discussions with the DRC about the guidance and so on that it needs to develop to ensure that it and other public bodies implement the duty effectively. We are currently at the stage of examining how we do that in practice. Obviously, the disability equality duty will lay out the responsibilities that are placed on the Executive and other public bodies, not least of which are the duty to produce a disability equality scheme in December and the duty on ministers to report at the end of three years on how the public sector is delivering. The Executive and other public sector bodies will have to do a lot of work on the matter.

We hope that the work that the disability working group has undertaken will assist the Executive to identify the steps that need to be taken to improve the lot of disabled people in Scotland. I suspect that the committee's disability inquiry will also help public sector bodies to identify need. We are at the stage at which the framework is set. We are very serious about developing the appropriate mechanism internally to deliver. We are working collaboratively with public sector bodies and the DRC to see how we move the agenda forward during the year. The committee's work and the dialogue with stakeholders will be extremely important in helping us to shape our approach to the areas of activity that need to be addressed.

Nora Radcliffe: A busy time is ahead for a lot of people—I hope to good effect.

The Convener: We have a few minutes left, so members can ask any other questions that they feel have not been answered.

John Swinburne: I would like to know what the Executive is doing to combat the use of a concept that has developed in recent years. I am talking about the media's use of the phrase "benefit culture", which is a most disparaging phrase. There is a lot of talk about people being politically correct and doing the politically correct thing. For any media outlet to talk about thousands of people who are doing their best to get back into employment as being part of the benefit culture is not acceptable. What could you do to stop the media blasting out that disparaging phrase at every opportunity? People are people. They want to work and contribute and do not want to be carried by society. It is wrong that that disparaging attitude that has crept into the media is not challenged by people such as you.

Allan Wilson: As I said, there must be a change in mindset. I must admit that I have been a bit discouraged by some of the media coverage of the matter, although it does not surprise me.

People were written off in the 1980s and 1990s as being unfit ever to work again. That was part of the process from which the benefit dependency culture grew. Everyone in the room would agree that it is important that we smash that culture where it exists and introduce incentives into the process so that people are given opportunities. People should not be written off. As I said, they should have the opportunity to share in our growing prosperity. That is what our strategy for closing the opportunity gap is all about; it is about giving people economic opportunity through employment. The employability framework will be one of the means by which we seek to deliver on that objective.

I share your disdain at some of the media coverage that the issue evokes, but that is the media for you.

The Convener: It is worth noting that many of the disabled people to whom we have spoken throughout the country—from Orkney to Ayr—have told us that they want to get into work for the first time and that they want the barriers to be removed to enable them to get to that stage. All they want is a level playing field; they want to have the same rights as everyone else.

Marilyn Livingstone: One of the points on which I totally agree with the minister is that where local arrangements work well we should ensure that we keep them. It is important to have local flexibility. We have certainly heard that in the evidence. All members of the committee are keen

to see such provision being kept and rolled out. Best practice should be rolled out throughout the country.

The proposed reorganisation of Scottish Enterprise is an issue. There have been media reports—for example in *The Herald* on Friday—about what would appear to be a significant increase in the status of Scottish Enterprise national and a diminution in the status of the local enterprise companies. From my experience, things have worked well when the local enterprise companies have been involved, apart from when restrictions have been imposed as a result of policy. In some partnerships with which I have been involved, national rigidity has restricted their ability to participate fully in the policy. The committee has discussed that matter. What impact will the proposed reorganisation have on the agenda that we have discussed this morning?

Allan Wilson: It should not have any adverse impact. Internal discussions are still taking place in Scottish Enterprise on the matter, which is an operational matter for it in the first instance. It has extensively consulted partners in the process and I know that that consultation has shaped its proposals. It will want to discuss the outcome of last week's board meeting with ministers and to apprise them of what has been proposed. Notwithstanding Scottish Enterprise's operational requirements, it should be said that closing the opportunity gap, creating full employment and expanding opportunities for those who are currently excluded are our priorities and we do not want there to be any distraction from those. Everything that the enterprise network does will support us in meeting those objectives.

I agree with what you said about local delivery. The Fife employment support programme is a particularly good example. The health service works in partnership with other local delivery agencies to address the needs of people who have a history of mental illness. We know that flexible local partnerships and tailor-made solutions for individuals work and our intention is that they should continue.

Marilyn Livingstone: Good. Thank you.

The Convener: I thank the minister for giving evidence. We look forward to welcoming him back to the committee on 7 March, when we will consider access to further and higher education for disabled people.

Meeting closed at 12:13.

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