EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE

Tuesday 18 April 2006

Session 2

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DISABILITY INQUIRY 1597

EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE

7th 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

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
Ms Rosemary Byrne (South of Scotland) (SSP)
Linda Fabiani (Central Scotland) (SNP)
Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green)
Mrs Nanette Milne (North East Scotland) (Con)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING GAVE EVIDENCE:

Richard Brickley (Disability Sport Fife)
Charlie Forbes (Highland Disability Sport)
Morven Gregor (Birds of Paradise Theatre Company)
Frank Keddilty (North Ayrshire Leisure)
Bobby Kerr (West Dunbartonshire Council)
Anne Knowles (Project Ability)
Suzanne Laing (Lothian Disability Sport)
Jan-Bert van den Berg (Artlink Edinburgh and Lothians)
Fiona Wernham (Edinburgh Leisure)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Steve Farrell

SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

Zoé Tough

ASSISTANT CLERK

Roy McMahon

LOCATION

Committee Room 1

Scottish Parliament

Equal Opportunities Committee

Tuesday 18 April 2006

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

Disability Inquiry

The Convener (Cathy Peattie): Good morning and welcome to the seventh meeting in 2006 of the Equal Opportunities Committee. I remind all present that mobile phones should be turned off, as they interfere with the sound system. I have apologies from John Swinburne. Jamie McGrigor and Nora Radcliffe will be a bit late.

This is the ninth oral evidence session for the committee's disability inquiry. I warmly welcome our witnesses and I remind them that, although we will not follow the usual evidence-taking format, we will obviously record the meeting. I will start by asking each witness to give an outline of the work that their group does. I put down a marker by saying that we plan to stop at 11 o'clock for a comfort break, in case the witnesses think that we are going to be sitting here all morning and start to shuffle about in their seats.

I invite our participants to give brief introductions before we move on to discuss the issues round the table. The round-table format is a bit different from formal evidence sessions, but it will allow us to have discussions and seek clarification from other participants. I remind everyone that they must speak through me in order for us to have a good and full discussion, otherwise it is difficult to control this kind of event and keep things flowing.

I invite Charlie Forbes to start.

Charlie Forbes (Highland Disability Sport): I am Highland Council's disability sport development officer. I work in conjunction with the charity group Highland Disability Sport and will try to represent as many of its views as I can.

Jan-Bert van den Berg (Artlink Edinburgh and Lothians): I am the director of Artlink, which provides a range of services for people with disabilities who are involved in the arts.

Fiona Wernham (Edinburgh Leisure): I am head of sports and service development at Edinburgh Leisure, which is a trust organisation that manages all the City of Edinburgh Council's leisure services.

Richard Brickley (Disability Sport Fife): I retired from Fife Council last Sunday, but I am the chair of Scottish Disability Sport and the president of Disability Sport Fife, which I am here to represent. My work is on physical activities for people with disabilities.

The Convener: So you have not retired from that.

Richard Brickley: I have not.

The Convener: That is good.

Anne Knowles (Project Ability): I work with Project Ability, which is a Glasgow-based organisation that works in the visual arts with people who have a range of disabilities. We provide studio spaces, workshops and a gallery where people can exhibit their work.

Frank Keddilty (North Ayrshire Leisure): I am the chief executive of North Ayrshire Leisure Ltd, which is a leisure trust, a company limited by guarantee and a recognised Scottish charity. We operate leisure centres, golf courses and outdoor sports and ancillary services on behalf of North Ayrshire Council for the community as a whole in North Ayrshire.

Suzanne Laing (Lothian Disability Sport): I am the sports co-ordinator for Lothian Disability Sport, which is a charity and voluntary organisation that is a branch of Scottish Disability Sport. I will represent the views of those with disabilities in Lothian who take part in sport.

Morven Gregor (Birds of Paradise Theatre Company): I am the artistic director of Birds of Paradise Theatre Company, which is an inclusive touring theatre company that employs disabled and non-disabled actors. We also do outreach work with disabled and non-disabled young people and, obviously, have inclusive audiences.

Bobby Kerr (West Dunbartonshire Council): I am part of the management team that manages West Dunbartonshire Council's three leisure centres.

The Convener: I hope that all the witnesses enjoy this morning's session. I look forward to our discussion.

I ask the witnesses to share with us any examples that they have of good practice in service provision for disabled people.

Fiona Wernham: We have established a good partnership relationship with FABB Scotland, which is a disability organisation. We have sourced funding to allow FABB Scotland to provide support workers, to ensure that our leisure provision for young people on Friday evenings is as inclusive as possible. We have 20 to 30 places for young people with higher support needs, which are supported by staff from FABB Scotland and funded through the Big Lottery Fund. We have done good partnership work to ensure that our programme is as inclusive as possible.

Richard Brickley: In Fife, we have the image project, which is funded by the Big Lottery Fund and is aimed specifically at children and young people with physical, sensory and learning disabilities. We set out to provide physical activity options for children at lunch time, after school, at the weekend, in the evenings and during holidays throughout the year, in all communities. Part of the money was used to employ a facilitator one day a week. We engaged with physical education teachers in schools and head teachers to identify where the children were. We then met them and their families to decide what they wanted to participate in. We identified leaders and facilities and set up funding mechanisms. As the programme is funded through the Big Lottery Fund, we hope that it will be sustainable after May 2007, when the funding runs out.

The project is geared primarily towards physical activity, because we believe passionately that involvement in sport may come later if we get children physically active. Members will know that children and adults with disabilities are among the least active in our population—they rate even lower than teenage girls and older people.

The Convener: What success do you have in attracting participants to the sessions?

Richard Brickley: Some groups started with four or five children, but all the groups are successful, in that children attend them. Before groups were set up, we had to identify an existing need or interest. We have tried to set up groups in challenged communities and places where opportunities would not normally exist in the mainstream community.

Frank Keddilty: We are involved with several initiatives. We have been involved with the North Ayrshire Sports Association for the Disabled, a voluntary organisation that has been on the go for 15 or 20 years, to increase participation in sport by people from a variety of age groups and with various disabilities.

In the past three years, we have been involved with the Ayrshire special games in partnership with North Ayrshire Council, South Ayrshire Council, East Ayrshire Council and NHS Ayrshire and Arran. The games are an annual three-day event, scheduled to take place in May, for children and young people with disabilities.

We have also been involved in delivering part of the New Opportunities Fund programme to special schools in North Ayrshire. More recently, we have managed to secure private sponsorship, which is delivering football activities for children with special needs.

Jan-Bert van den Berg: I will talk about the arts access service that we provide for people with a range of disabilities, which enables them to go to arts events in Edinburgh and Lothian. I want to highlight the service for two reasons. First, it is purely person-centred; it is based on the individual's interests and meets their particular support needs. Secondly, we are considering areas in which there are still major barriers, such as those experienced by deaf and hard of hearing audiences. We found it interesting, but not altogether surprising, that there are still major barriers for those people to overcome.

Bobby Kerr: We started an initiative in West Dunbartonshire called shining stars, which is for children aged 4 to 15. Initially, we intended to get children to participate in physical exercise in two-hour sessions during the school holidays at Easter, in the summer and in October. We have now progressed to providing a four-week block of skills-development sessions. West Dunbartonshire Council funds the initiative, which has been so successful that the council has expanded it to involve 16 to 24-year-olds. In this financial year, the council is continuing to fund the initial shining stars project as well as the new project. We are consulting groups to find out what kind of activities young people in those age groups would like to participate in.

Morven Gregor: We are trying to develop a stepping-stone approach. Birds of Paradise Theatre Company has a professional, national tour, for which we employ disabled and non-disabled performers. We think that that is a great platform for our vision of inclusion. However, we encounter a problem in finding those performers: where do they go to get professional training? We are working with schools to encourage young people to believe that, although they might have a disability, they can still consider a career in the performing arts. We are also working with the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama as a training provider to make it more inclusive. We are trying to develop stepping-stone projects, such as community tours, to give folk more experience and, we hope, to get us more actors for our future mainstream national tours.

The Convener: Has it been problematic for the tutors involved to provide training and experience?

Morven Gregor: Yes. We are working on that at different levels. We are working with schools to find young people who want to do stuff out of school, as that can be tricky. For example, we work with Ashcraig school in Glasgow, which is a school for physically disabled young folk who come from all over, not just the city centre. That can present a problem for activities on a Saturday afternoon at the RSAMD. I offered eight young folk the opportunity to be involved this year and two of them have said that they would be interested. Some of them might have other commitments, but that shows that there is a difficulty.

There is a good pool of tutors, but we are also developing a new project to provide training to disabled young people who are interested in becoming tutors, which will allow them to work alongside our permanent staff and gain skills. That will work as a cycle to provide people with more experience and opportunities.

Elaine Smith (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab): You mentioned schools. Do you have any dealings with the Scottish Youth Theatre?

Morven Gregor: Yes. The SYT is the third partner in the project that we run with the RSAMD to bring together young people from Ashcraig and YouthWorks. We hope to give the SYT some training input as well.

Anne Knowles: We are most keen to work on the sustainability of activity. An example is the children and young people's programme that we have been running since about 1999, in which young people with disabilities work with professional artists. Some of those youngsters are now young adults. We are particularly proud that we have been able to sustain that programme and, for example, to help those young people to exhibit their work at a national level in the Glasgow art fair, which they did for the first time this year. They have been able to develop good visual arts skills. That sustainability is also a feature of our mental health project, which is a partnership with Greater Glasgow NHS Board. It is important that people know that they will have long-term support for developing skills.

10:15

Charlie Forbes: Last year, Highland Disability Sport managed to secure some funding to create a sport-specific coaching development programme for people with learning disabilities to take part in the sport of their choice, leading up to the special Olympics last year. The programme, which ran well, paid for coaching and transport, so that the athletes could travel to coaching events. The legacy of that is our sport-specific groups, which are run by specialist coaches. With the funding and transport issues that arise from keeping groups together, the hardest part now is to try to continue that work.

The Convener: A number of people have mentioned the funding issue, and Anne Knowles has highlighted sustainability. Are there challenges with funding or with providing services for people with disabilities?

Fiona Wernham: There are challenges with funding. Some of the young people with disabilities with whom we aim to engage might have high support needs—in relation to the number of staff required, for example. As a trust organisation, we struggle to provide staff with the right level of experience and to cost that into our budget. Funding for staff is definitely an issue.

Jan-Bert van den Berg: There are huge challenges represented by sustainability issues and the resources required. It is all very well for people such as us, whose particular focus is on the needs of people with disabilities, to talk about our experiences, but working with mainstream organisations, whose focus might not be people with disabilities, is more difficult. Such organisations have a range of other priorities that they need to meet and find it much more difficult to recognise what the specific needs are and how they might address and resource them. That is a huge issue.

Ms Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP): You talked about working with mainstream organisations. Do you find that they are aware of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995? Do you find that you spend your time not only helping the people you want to encourage but explaining the DDA and training issues to other organisations?

Jan-Bert van den Berg: Yes. At the moment we are having an exchange of views with the Edinburgh Playhouse on its charging policy for people with disabilities. For example, people in a wheelchair can use only a certain area of the Playhouse, which also attracts the highest cost. It is impossible for those individuals to access other, cheaper seats within the auditorium. We are considering whether we can challenge that under the DDA. We are also considering the training issue. There is knowledge of the DDA there, but in fairly simplistic terms.

Morven Gregor: People often phone us, expecting that we will know the answers to their questions. We try our best to answer as many questions as we can, but they cover a wide range. Some people might ask us a precise question about whether it is okay to ask a personal assistant to do such and such. Other folk ask what sort of language they should use if they are working with X. We have a new campaigning post that is one-year funded—we are constantly looking for money to fund such posts—and involves reaching out to other mainstream theatre organisations and encouraging them to consider inclusive practice. Even in the early stages, some interesting issues have been raised. Folk say that they are interested in having a conversation, but it is unclear what actual changes they will make beyond that.

Richard Brickley: There is never enough money to go round. If we say that the primary barrier is finance, we will make no progress. However, Fife Council and, I am sure, other councils offer a 50 per cent reduction for people with disabilities and have a carers-go-free policy. Most local authorities have implemented policies of that sort. One mistake that we make is often to give that section of the population things for free, which means that sustainability becomes an issue. We have always adopted the policy of having a 50 per cent reduction, so that there is a payment from stage 1. There is also a notion that transport must always be provided and that it is a real killer.

If we really want to have sustainable programmes, we must eliminate some of the major barriers, ensure that there is payment right from the beginning and assume that people can get themselves to a venue. It is necessary to work in partnership with other agencies. I represent a voluntary organisation that works with other voluntary organisations and the statutory sector—social work, education and community services. Often it is possible to share the cost, so that finance is not quite the barrier that it seems to be. I am sorry that I took a long time to explain that.

Jan-Bert van den Berg: Richard Brickley has put the issue in slightly simplistic terms. It is incredibly important that we work in partnership, but we must recognise that transport is a huge issue for people. We cannot say that by working together we will overcome the problem, because I do not think that that stands up.

Marilyn Livingstone (Kirkcaldy) (Lab): When we took evidence, it became apparent to us that there are different levels of provision and access in different areas. The issues of transport and finance were raised throughout the country, but there were specific issues in specific areas. A very accessible programme in one council area might not be available in another area just across the road. Do organisations have enough opportunity to discuss issues? The committee has been thinking about that point. How do we disseminate the best practice that each organisation has told us about today?

The Scottish Parliament is seeking a solution for the whole of Scotland. How do we ensure that the people who have the expertise share information and support one another throughout the country, so that good, innovative, supportive and successful programmes of the sort that we have heard about today are taken forward? Is there a sufficient support network throughout the country to allow that to happen? Do you have regular discussions? If not, what can the committee do through its inquiry to ensure that best practice is shared more? That is a complicated question, but it is important.

Jan-Bert van den Berg: It is incredibly important. It is possible to focus too much on transport or finance issues when the real issue is our society's attitude towards people with disabilities. Once we start to understand that we must look at services from a disabled person's perspective, we will start to move forward.

There is not enough opportunity for us to share good practice. That takes time and—I hate to say it—resources. We need to look at the mechanisms that might already be available and the national umbrella organisations that might be able to give further support. There is a lack of sharing of that knowledge.

Suzanne Laing: I have been working with various agencies in Lothian—the local authorities and other organisations, whether voluntary or not. When they set out their strategy, they can put down on paper where they would like their provision to go; that looks really good and ticks all the right boxes, but the problem comes at the delivery end. People are coming forward who would like to be involved in coaching, but there is maybe not the link to deliver the expertise over again, or there may be barriers to—in sport—good coaches being involved. When the coaches are asked to become disability awareness trained or to work with a specific group, an element of fear comes in. That may happen for a variety of reasons, many of which are to do with lack of understanding of the issues. That is a huge problem for us to overcome. Even if money is available, if no people are coming forward who have a good understanding of the issues and are willing to listen and adapt, it does not matter how much money we throw at the situation.

Anne Knowles: One of the problems with the arts is their status among other activities. Those of us who work in the area have seen the evidence and are convinced of the intrinsic importance of the arts to the individual's well-being in all areas of their life. Often, however, when times get hard, that is the area that everybody thinks is dispensable. I would argue that that is wrong. We have seen people become self-confident and able to look after themselves much better simply because they have gained a feeling of achievement and worth by taking part in such activities. We must try to change people's attitudes and minds at all levels, from the Parliament right down to the grass roots, about what those activities can offer the individual.

Morven Gregor: Going back to the notion of getting folk together in a forum to talk about good practice, I would be keen that that should not just involve us patting ourselves on the back. If the forum were outward looking and enabled us to communicate with other organisations, that would be worth while.

Bobby Kerr: Networking is very important. There are formal and informal ways of networking. I sit on a group of leisure managers from local authorities in Scotland. It started off with half a dozen of us meeting every couple of months to talk about good and bad practice and how not to reinvent the wheel. We now have 16 local authorities represented on the group as well as sportscotland, Quest and the Institute of Leisure and Amenity Management. The group is not formal, but we meet every couple of months and have discussed disability issues many times. If the will exists, it is possible to contact people and organise such forums—I have proved that it can be done. We share all sorts of practice and the group is very good. People just have to make the effort. I do not know whether the Executive might want to take the lead in that regard.

The Convener: Some of us worked with local authorities in those kinds of fora 20 years ago—I am showing my age—around disability and access to sport. However, disabled people are telling the committee that the barriers are still there and that appears to be the case. It is good to know that people are working in that way, but how do we move forward? That was Marilyn Livingstone's question.

Frank Keddilty: I return to the comment about finance and charging individuals who may be disabled for access to facilities. Like most local authorities, we operate a concessionary charging scheme. It is only right that that is done. I believe that people should pay, but that disabled people should be at some financial advantage in such a scheme. The difficulty arises with regard to the requirement to provide support staff to facilitate sessions and activities for groups.

Like most authorities, we provide a lot of activities in our work with special schools, disabled groups and other voluntary groups. The challenge that we face is to facilitate more casual access to our facilities and services as opposed to the structured group approach that we already use. Tailoring some of our programmes in that way would inevitably mean that we would require a greater staff resource, notwithstanding the fact that we should also try to access the voluntary sector. Given that finances are under extreme pressure in all organisations, the difficulty with that is the availability of financial resources to support a service that would not generate significant income.

10:30

Marlyn Glen (North East Scotland) (Lab): I will widen out the question with a bit of a challenge. When we shared good practice earlier, Fiona Wernham talked about provision on Friday evenings and you mentioned a three-day annual event, so it is clear that services have not been adapted sufficiently. Disabled people—particularly young disabled people—keep telling us that they would like the chance to be spontaneous. How do we work that into provision?

Frank Keddilty: That is difficult. We must endeavour to make parts of the programmes that we offer, such as holiday programmes, suitable for disabled individuals and we must aim to roll those out over a period of time. The difficulty with that is securing the dedicated resources that would allow two or three individuals to call in and use the services.

Nora Radcliffe (Gordon) (LD): Perhaps mainstream budgets should include an element to cover the increased funding that is necessary if we are serious about equality of opportunity. What do the witnesses think about that?

Jan-Bert van den Berg: I hate to mention direct payment, but I suppose that it provides the environment to give the spending power to the disabled person. I know from experience that that is fraught with huge difficulty, especially if the disabled person needs a legal structure around them to enable it to happen, because that means that the carers become finance officers. However, that system, in which the disabled person rather than the service provider makes the decision, is being explored. It is an interesting system to explore, although there are major problems with it. We need to think about who makes the decisions; ultimately, they must be made by the disabled person, not the service provider. That is incredibly important.

The national programme for mental health and emotional well-being is an interesting example of networking or profiling particular issues. The Parliament might want to examine that programme.

Fiona Wernham: In the past couple of years, there has been a lot of investment in sport and leisure, particularly for young people. Edinburgh Leisure is trying to engage with people with additional support needs, which naturally means that we will have lower numbers of users and higher numbers of staff. However, that has meant that we have faced challenges with accessing funding from certain funding bodies because we are not targeting many users. It would be beneficial if some funding bodies could lose sight of high numbers and focus on quality of input. This is a great time for sport and leisure because of the amount of funding from the Big Lottery Fund and the amount of new opportunities funding. Sport and leisure have been heavily resourced, but we need to change the emphasis of some of the funding packages so that we can provide good programmes for people with additional support needs.

Nora Radcliffe mentioned mainstream funding. It would be a great advantage to have mainstream funds that were set aside for people with additional support needs to ensure that organisations such as Edinburgh Leisure can be serious about providing equality of service. At the moment, it is a challenge. Yesterday, on the back of a meeting, we pulled off the internet a lot of information about charitable organisations that fund activities for people.

The point has been made that, if there is a will to work in partnership, the opportunities and resources are out there. It just takes someone from each organisation to drive such work. Without partnership working, those opportunities can be missed.

The Convener: Nora Radcliffe's point was that there should be mainstream rather than charity provision.

Charlie Forbes: In the Highlands, the geography is an obvious access barrier to spontaneous decisions to undertake activities. For example, someone might decide to go swimming, but be told that that is not possible because the pool has no trained person available to assist or because a lane is not available because a school is using it.

Another issue is transport. People with wheelchairs must have access to particular types of transport, such as low-line buses or specially adapted taxis. Too many people in the Highlands sit at home waiting for a specialised taxi, which is more costly for them, or sit around sports centres waiting for such a taxi to take them home at night. I have found that to be a major issue.

Richard Brickley: We are good at talking to one another on the physical activity and sports side. The umbrella body in Scotland is Scottish Disability Sport, which has a professional officers group, local authority representatives and a branch officers conference. There is a regular exchange between officers of the association and people like us who work at a local level. We share models of good practice and have regular discussions. However, we do not exchange views with our colleagues in the arts, except where local authorities have integrated services.

The issue of spontaneity must be approached from both ends. Many of our young people do not have the physical literacy to access services because they do not have a physical education teacher at school or they do not get the opportunity to learn new sports and skills that they could do or exercise on their own. No doubt we will return to that dimension, which is about the ability of individual children to be spontaneous and go swimming, for example. The issue is whether they have the skills to do that on their own. A further issue is the training of leisure centre staff, which is a different ball game. There are two separate issues therefore in relation to the spontaneity challenge.

Ms White: I was going to raise the issue of the training of staff and their attitude to people with disabilities. We have heard a lot about people wanting to access, for example, swimming pools or trampolines, but staff telling them that they cannot do so because of health and safety issues. They were using the legislation to prevent access. I wonder how prevalent such attitudes are.

Anne Knowles: Much of the discussion has been about children and young people, which is right, but we must also think about how we provide for the older disabled person who perhaps has different needs for accessing things in different ways. That is quite a challenge because it involves getting information through to people to help them make choices. We can network and talk about best practice, but the question is how we get through to the isolated person who lives on their own or to their carers that there is something there for them. We try to work closely with many of those who provide housing for people with learning disabilities, through doing workshops and training with them. We must go out much more in such tentacle ways.

Morven Gregor: I do not disagree that older people are important, but I think that the problems probably start with the treatment of younger people. The training issue applies whether we are talking about school staff, folk in leisure centres or front-of-house people in theatres. It is hard for folk to communicate and ask the most basic questions when the approach is one of separation rather than inclusion. People can feel a sense of difference and otherness.

I will quickly give two examples. We were asked to go into a mainstream school, where two young disabled girls had joined the drama class. The teachers wanted to include the girls, but they were anxious about health and safety. I told them that I had worked with young girls like that before and that I was sure it would be fine, but it was not until the care assistants assured the staff that the wheelchairs would not fall over that they believed that that was the case. They had not managed to do that before. There is a baseline training issue.

From my other experience as a theatre director, I know that it is important to have a dialogue. I would ask disabled actors whether they were okay about doing something and whether it felt all right for them. I would do the same with other actors.

Jan-Bert van den Berg: Lottery funding has been mentioned a great deal. Obviously, I misunderstand the word "additionality". I thought that lottery funding was for extra and unusual services, rather than for support needs. There is a huge problem if lottery funding replaces mainstream funding. However, I am not complaining, because we benefit from lottery funding in quite a major way.

The other issue is health and safety. It is very much about common sense, as are personal safety issues. Occasionally, health and safety considerations seem to be an excuse for not delivering a service. That applies not only to the mainstream providers, but to the care providers. When it becomes too difficult to provide a service, it is easier to have people remain in their homes than to have them go out. That problem needs to be addressed.

Fiona Wernham: Many of the staff of Edinburgh Leisure do not have the necessary confidence, because they are not exposed to practical situations very often. We make disability equality training compulsory for all our staff, but there needs to be hands-on, practical training. We can give a PowerPoint presentation on disability equality, but what does that mean on the ground when a disabled person comes in? How should staff deal with that situation? There is an issue of self-confidence. We are working with Capability Scotland to repackage our training, so that it includes more practical experience and gives our staff more of the support and confidence that they seek. There are ways of doing that. We need to find and work with the people and organisations that can provide the right expertise.

Richard Brickley: When I came into local authority working and the leisure centre business in 1975, I was not allowed to take wheelchair users on to an upper floor of the facility in which I worked. We have moved forward enormously and must continue to do so. In my role with Scottish Disability Sport, I run events in leisure centres throughout Scotland. I find the staff unbelievably accommodating and very skilled. Very good programmes are being run in the centres, but there are challenges.

Sandra White mentioned trampolining. If someone asks me as a leisure centre manager to give them trampolines for a trampoline session, we cannot simply do that. We have to ask specific questions. Is the person trained to take the session? Do they have ladders for people to get up on to the trampoline? Trampolining is an unbelievably high-risk activity. There is sometimes an expectation within the community of people who have a disability that they can access everything and cut the corners in the process to which the mainstream population must adhere. I do not know whether that makes sense. In the business, we must conform to certain rules and regulations, because we are accountable. However, we do not treat people with disabilities differently. We simply apply the same standards across the board.

Nora Radcliffe: We have had some positive and a lot of negative feedback on attitudes. Would the witnesses like to say a bit more about the attitudes of staff towards disabled people and the provision of disability equality training for staff? Fiona Wernham made the good point that practical, hands-on training is much more important than theoretical training.

Frank Keddilty: Staff in our leisure centres and other related activities are the same as the general population. Some are in tune with a variety of people, whether they are able bodied or disabled. I totally accept that some of them are a bit afraid of working with someone who is disabled. Like Edinburgh Leisure, North Ayrshire Leisure definitely does its bit on awareness training. A number of our staff are specifically trained in working with disabled people. It is beneficial that some of the sports governing bodies have included some form of disability training in their qualifications. When we employ staff to deliver sports activities, we require all of them to be qualified under the appropriate governing body of a sport. That is a benefit, as it highlights the issue of the special requirements regarding disabled sport.

I agree with what was said about health and safety. I imagine that health and safety is used as an excuse by relatively few and relatively small organisations. The majority of people around the table will have health and safety for breakfast, lunch and dinner, as it is part and parcel of life. When somebody wants to use a service that is outwith the norm, it does not matter whether they are able bodied or disabled; a risk assessment is needed to determine what the requirements are.

10:45

Jan-Bert van den Berg: I would be concerned if we looked at the issue as positive or negative. We have moved on a long way from where we were 18 years ago when I entered the field. We should not ignore that, but we should not ignore the reality that health and safety is important in relation to making appropriate risk assessments. I do not think that any corners should be cut in that regard. It is important to be realistic about the barriers that are still faced and how they affect people’s experience. Health and safety can be used as an excuse, but an appropriate risk assessment can be a positive experience.

Elaine Smith: My question is on risk assessment and whether we treat everybody equally in that regard. I will use the example of a young man whom I dealt with. He was in a wheelchair and went ice skating, but one day it was decided that he posed a health and safety risk to other skaters. How much is that the result of a can’t-do attitude? Should we not look at the situation with can-do eyes? There is a problem in Scotland as a whole—including in the tourism industry—with our approach to such issues.

I go back to something that Frank Keddilty said about people in jobs being familiar with health and safety issues. I wonder whether we should do better in choosing people for front-line jobs that involve dealing with the public in the leisure industry, for example. Should not recruitment procedures ensure that we have the right people for those jobs—people with pleasant dispositions and can-do attitudes? Perhaps we do not reflect in wages the responsibility that front-line staff have, especially in places such as leisure centres.

The Convener: I will let Frank Keddilty answer that.

Frank Keddilty: I am confident that by far the majority of our employees are suitable for the jobs that they are doing and are capable of doing a good job at front of house. Whenever they are called on to deliver a variation from the service, by far the majority of them bend over backwards to deliver it. It is important that we encourage that attitude among our staff. I am confident that our staff deliver, although I am not saying that things cannot be improved, at times. Services can always be improved.

The point was made earlier that situations involving contact with people who are disabled can be few and far between, and people with particular physical disabilities using a service can pose challenges that individual members of staff may not have come across before. Like any other service provider, we endeavour to meet the requirements of all our customers, and if that means that we need to modify our services somewhat we will endeavour to do so. Sometimes, we are successful; sometimes, we need to improve somewhat.

Charlie Forbes: My comment follows on from what Frank Keddilty and Richard Brickley have said about moving on. There have been issues with staff in Highland. When I started in my role as the development officer up there, some staff were not very aware of disabled sportspeople's requirements. It is about approaching the issue positively and identifying the ways in which we can support those people.

I like to think that we have made a big move towards improving standards in the Highlands. One way we have done that is by inviting the sports coaching students who are going through the coaching modules at the local college to get involved. As of last year, the college has included a 12-hour module on disability and sport in its training. The students have to go out and work with people who have disabilities. If that can be rolled out and introduced as a model of good practice—I am sure that it is already included in some other courses—and people are subjected to working with those who have disabilities, there will be a transition and, through time, more of them will build up their confidence. I have organised events in Highland and staff are very good and accommodating. Once staff have built up their confidence through being subjected to the practical element of working with people who have disabilities, they have the humbling experience of realising that it is what sport is about.

Suzanne Laing: Lothian has a similar partnership set-up with local colleges. For the past couple of years, disability has been a big part of the sports coaching development modules. The subject has been dealt with by people who work regularly with those who have disabilities. The East Lothian development officer for disabilities helps to deliver the course and he has regular hands-on contact with people with disabilities. I have also helped.

The people who are coming through the course are kids of 16. It is great that they are getting involved at such a young age, but we have to keep them interested. We have to tell them that it is good that they are doing the subject as part of their course, but we have to ensure that they want to continue with the subject when it is not compulsory. We in Lothian have had difficulty getting students to take on such work in a voluntary capacity.

That might tie in with funding. If we want people to become and stay involved, they might want to be paid, because that is the nature of sport now. A lot of people are getting qualifications through colleges and universities and they want to be paid for what they do. That is fantastic, because it improves the quality of the sector, but the other side of the coin is whether we can fund the work and maintain people's interest. I do not have the answer to that.

Bobby Kerr: Our existing staff are very good, on the whole. When we are lucky enough to get funding from the Big Lottery Fund for one, two or three years, we have to attract good-quality staff to work under temporary contracts. However, in year 3 the local authority starts to sweat and asks what it is going to do with the project, whether it will ditch it or mainstream it, and who has the money to mainstream it. Frequently, we cannot get good-quality staff for such a short period of time. We have found that to be a great difficulty.

That is not the only problem. When we are awarded the money, we can get six months into the first year before we recruit someone, if we are lucky enough to get them through the recruitment process. The Scottish Executive might consider whether funding could be given for longer than three years. That would help us to attract good-quality staff.

Fiona Wernham: I have a point about the right people being in the right place at the right time. At one of our leisure centres, young people with disabilities were providing challenges for our leisure staff, to the extent that some situations arose that the staff did not know how to deal with particularly well, so interest in the programme started to go down. However, we met representatives of some voluntary organisations and special educational needs schools and tried to get people with good experience of working with those with disabilities to mentor our staff and show them how to deal with situations that might arise. They have been really supportive and accommodating.

That is just one example of where we have turned a negative experience into a more positive one through working with the experts, as opposed to getting someone with a sports qualification and trying to make them comfortable with people who have additional support needs. Let us get people in who are comfortable working with people who have disabilities and get them working with our sports experts. We are trying to do some work in that area at the moment. It comes back to Elaine Smith's point about staff confidence.

Marlyn Glen: Will you outline the provision for carers and personal support people in your organisations? Richard Brickley said that in Fife there is a carers-go-free policy for certain activities. What is the picture elsewhere?

Richard Brickley: The carers-go-free policy is now official, although it has been in place unofficially for three decades. Escorts or support people who go to a leisure centre or go into the countryside to fish or to play golf do not have to pay. However, there is an expectation that the person who is being supported requires their care. It is not a case of the individual going to one end of the gym and the carer going to the other end; the carer is there because the individual whom they are with requires their care. There are strict guidelines about what the carer should be doing. The policy applies throughout every service in Fife Council. That is not unrealistic.

We are now considering providing support services for carers, such as concessionary schemes for them to access activities in their leisure time without the person for whom they are caring. A lot of our carers are young people and a lot are older people.

Can I pick up on a point that was made earlier?

The Convener: Of course you can.

Richard Brickley: I have a bit of a hang-up about funding. I cannot understand why we consider the employment of individuals to be a problem or a barrier, given that the individuals coming through the door are paying for the services provided. My little, simple mind works out that if someone pays £1.50 to attend a session and it costs the provider £15 to employ somebody, the provider is washing its face. The disabled community should not be seen as a burden to local authorities. They deserve the same opportunities and services as every other section of the population, but they do not get equal access at the moment. There is no local authority provision of after-school activities or adult multi-activity groups. I cannot understand why, because people will pay for such services and the money that is collected will pay for those leading the groups. Such activities should be run through paid leaders.

Jan-Bert van den Berg: I have two points to make about the carer issue. We considered a carers-go-free policy with advice from the Disability Rights Commission and we discovered that, funnily enough, allowing the carer to go free would be classed as favourable treatment and would not, therefore, fall under the auspices of the DDA. There is the interesting tension that our trying to make life easier would not necessarily be within the legislative framework.

We also considered issues surrounding relatives, parents and carers and the huge burden that they carry in supporting their relatives in accessing opportunities. There needs to be a framework for carers to find additional support. It would be great if people could access any service simply by turning up. The problem is that a lot of individuals need personal care and, therefore, specific input. The principle of carers going free can be difficult to put into practice. Direct payments could provide the opportunity for individuals to turn up and participate spontaneously.

The Convener: We will stop now for a five-minute break.

10:59

Meeting suspended.

11:07

On resuming—

The Convener: Before the meeting was suspended, Marlyn Glen was considering issues to do with carers. I ask her whether she has any other questions.

Marlyn Glen: Would any of the other witnesses like to say what their organisations provide?

Bobby Kerr: In West Dunbartonshire, carers go free. We have a passport scheme—the client's or customer's card flags up a message that they may come in with a carer. The carer is not named specifically and may change—it can be the mum or dad, for example. There is no charge for the carer when they come in with the client. However, I accept the point that we could consider a scheme for the carers themselves.

Fiona Wernham: Edinburgh has a carers-go-free policy, too. We have gone a little further in that we have gone into partnership with VOCAL—Voice of Carers Across Lothian—which has about 4,000 registered carers throughout Edinburgh and the Lothians. We have issued each of those carers with a leisure card so that they can access mainstream gym-and-swim provision for £1. They still have to pay, but if they have some time away from their responsibilities they can access leisure facilities. The policy seems to work fairly well.

Frank Keddilty: We have a range of free and concessionary access schemes for carers.

Jan-Bert van den Berg: I highlight Edinburgh Playhouse's approach to carer goes free, which is a commercial promoter's approach—there is a £2 reduction on a £35 ticket. Obviously, local authorities do great work, but their attitude does not exist in other organisations.

Anne Knowles: We cannot provide a lot for carers, apart from somewhere to be, but whenever we have a trip for people, such as a sketching trip, the carers do not pay for their place on the bus. We do what we can on that.

Ms White: Local organisations, voluntary groups and local authorities seem to bend over backwards to provide services, but private enterprises such as cinemas and theatres do not. We have had reports that in such places very few seats are available for carers and those that are available can be more expensive, because they are at the front, for example. Does every carer find that when they take somebody out, not to a local authority venue, but to a cinema or theatre?

Morven Gregor: One problem that I have encountered is that you might not be able to sit beside your pal. If I go with a colleague to see somebody else's show, I might not go in a caring role, but I am with them and I would like to sit beside them, but if the front row is for wheelchair users only, where do I go?

Richard Brickley: Provision varies in the private sector. You can go to a concert at the Scottish Exhibition and Conference Centre in Glasgow as a companion to a person with severe mobility difficulties. Before it opened Murrayfield, the Scottish Rugby Union had a scheme to allow people to register, and it has kept that scheme going, so lots of places are available at major internationals. At local level, we are debating whether the word "carer" or "companion" should be used, because not everybody who supports somebody is described as a carer, so it is important that we use the right word.

Elaine Smith: How is the policy of who is allowed to go for free decided? How do you define a carer?

Bobby Kerr: If someone takes a concessionary membership because they have disabilities or are affected by disabilities, they can tell us that they will come on occasion with a carer. We take their word for it and show on their card that they will come with a carer. That way, no matter who the carer is, they will get in for free.

The Convener: So disabled people themselves decide.

Bobby Kerr: Yes.

Jan-Bert van den Berg: If we are looking at barriers, consistent pricing is quite a big issue. From our organisation's point of view, we need a bit of help with that, so any help that the Parliament or the Scottish Executive can give us would be incredibly useful.

The Convener: Define the kind of help that you want.

Jan-Bert van den Berg: It is a matter of interpreting what the barriers are. If the barriers are to do with price, supporting initiatives to lower prices or to make them fairer so that people can access theatres or cinemas will help, and it will also help to raise awareness.

Elaine Smith: My questions on carers have been answered. The only area that I feel we have not explored fully is partnership working, which I think Richard Brickley mentioned, and the issue may also tie in with support. If you have a good working relationship with social services, that might make access easier. Do any witnesses want to comment on partnership working within local authorities and between local authority social services departments and other agencies and organisations?

Fiona Wernham: We have found that awareness of what is available is important because it allows organisations to know that they can approach us and that we can be flexible and can consider programmes and services. We have been proactive in working with Capability Scotland, FABB Scotland and other organisations, because we want to provide a better service for people who have disabilities. We have to drive the process of engaging with social services and day care centres because those organisations are not chapping on our door to say, "Can I come and use your leisure services, because I know that you can provide something for us?" We face the challenge of trying to raise our profile with those services so that if they want to make more people more active more often, they can come and speak to us and we can try to make that happen. We need to raise our profile with specialist services that engage with people who have disabilities so that we can work with them to provide better services.

11:15

Frank Keddilty: If the provision of sport for disabled people was left solely to us, we could not do it. The bulk of our services are delivered by other organisations; we facilitate and support them to do that. Services can be provided by local groups or they can be tied in with education—through special schools—and social work.

The voluntary sector in North Ayrshire is fairly active in that respect, and we also have a tie-in with the other Ayrshire authorities. Earlier, I mentioned the Ayrshire special games. They are an annual event and a lot of work goes into their preparation and participation in them. A stand-alone trust—the Ayrshire Special Games Trust—has been established to run the games with the intention of promoting and developing disabled sport across the whole of Ayrshire. By working to support bodies such as the Ayrshire Special Games Trust, the company can develop disabled sport. We can provide expertise not only in relation to facilities, but in coaching and in boosting staff numbers. In addition to that work, we need to support the work of voluntary groups and the local authority and national health service agencies that are involved in such provision.

Richard Brickley: Partnership working is absolutely essential. Paediatric physiotherapists are involved at an early stage, so health services are very much involved, as are education and social work services. Health services also become involved in the later stages of people's lives.

One of the reasons why we formed Disability Sport Fife in 1977 was to bring representatives from all the agencies in the area around the table to dictate, determine and debate the future of physical activity and sport in Fife. As a voluntary organisation that has charitable status, Disability Sport Fife has the potential to raise new money. It also has membership on the national governing body. If only one statutory service has ownership of a programme, it is doomed to fail. Ownership has to be shared across all services and all of them should, as appropriate, provide grant aid and resource funding.

Let us take the simple matter of the special Olympics event to which Charlie Forbes alluded. Given the involvement that social work services have with the voluntary sector, they had to pick up the costs involved for their staff who travelled with the athletes. Not all the local authorities did that voluntarily, but social work services had to make that commitment, although another service was leading the programme. Partnership working is essential.

Jan-Bert van den Berg: I agree totally with that. We cannot deliver any of the services in which we are engaged unless we work closely with social services departments and other voluntary sector bodies. The involvement of a range of disciplines in the planning of a service can occasionally lead to inactivity and some buck passing. We need to consider the number of different disciplines that can be involved in a person's life at any one time because the number can mean that very little happens. We need to recognise that reality.

Morven Gregor: I want to unpick a little the notion of partnerships. Our company has all sorts of working relationships—I call them working partnerships—with other agencies, organisations and creative groups. There is also the issue of funding partnerships. If a company such as ours always goes to social services for its funding, a question arises. What does that say about how the art world in general perceives us? We want to be part of the art world and to be judged on equal terms with others in that sphere. However, if it is difficult for us to get money from the art world, we have to engage in other funding partnerships. I do not have an answer to the question; I am simply throwing out another question that needs to be answered.

The Convener: You are absolutely right. I would be interested to hear the views of other witnesses. We tend to put disabled people into the social-needs box—we see them as having a social disability and not as people who participate in things right across society.

Anne Knowles: The point is really interesting. In my early days with Project Ability, we were funded through the then Strathclyde Regional Council's social work department. I used to come up against exactly that problem; people used to say, "You are a social work client. You don't belong with us—they look after you."

When Glasgow City Council became our local authority, our funding changed; we are now funded under culture and leisure, which has turned around people's attitude to our provision and has changed people's perceptions of what our clients do when they come to us and the work that they produce. It is a mind thing. We do not get any social work funding, but that is not to say that individuals do not get such funding to take part in the activities that we run. I think that the important issue for Morven Gregor is the way her peer group of arts providers perceives her company's activity.

Nora Radcliffe: I want to relate that point to Richard Brickley's point that if an organisation provides a service, it should not have to provide transport, but should be able to assume that a transport provider will do that. I am trying to get my head round that. Perhaps we do not exert enough pressure on mainstream providers to give the equality provision that they should give, because that is being picked up as part of support.

Anne Knowles: That is absolutely right. We have never taken responsibility for people's care needs. If a person needs somebody to come with them, that is fine and they are welcome, but it is not up to us to organise that. The same applies to transport. A woman from an organisation in London that does similar work to ours told me that since she started organising transport, it is all she seems to do. It is important that organisations focus on what they provide.

Morven Gregor: I agree. If I had to organise transport, I would not be able to get on with what I need to do. However, on the other hand, if I do not think about transport, young folk will not come to do our activities at all. Other people are so used to putting up barriers and saying, "That is too difficult," or, "There is a transport issue." Nora Radcliffe's point about engaging mainstream providers is related to Jan-Bert van den Berg's point about putting money back in folk's pockets, although I do not know whether there is a way to do that.

Jan-Bert van den Berg: Positively speaking, it would be an interesting exercise to plan services from the point of view of the disabled person rather than from the mainstream's point of view. We could gain a huge benefit for everyone if we considered what the issues and problems are, tried to solve them and then delivered services that were accessible to all. All too often, that is not the case. Although huge strides have been made, the next step should be to start by planning and designing services from the disabled person's point of view and then to think how the services can be rolled out to society as a whole. The result would be absolutely brilliant services.

Morven Gregor: The biggest question of all is how to make Scotland more inclusive. Unfortunately, I cannot answer that, although I could make a few stabs at it.

The Convener: We would like to make recommendations on that, which is why we want to pick your brains.

Marlyn Glen: The Birds of Paradise Theatre Company's written evidence says that it has carried out an access audit of venues. I am interested to hear more about that because it would be worth giving some publicity to the issue. To move on to the accommodation problem and the understanding of access issues, I do not see why it would be difficult for us to ask for greater clarity in the Scottish tourist board's symbols.

Morven Gregor: One reason why we are a touring theatre company is that we think that disabled people should be out there and visible throughout Scotland. However, that raises its own issues. Venues are sometimes not 100 per cent familiar with what access means. Often, they think about access for audience members, but not backstage access, which is obviously what our actors need. I do not have a resident company, so we use different people for each show. In one case, we might have somebody who uses a wheelchair; in another, somebody may be deaf and need a visible fire alarm. There are many different access requirements. Last year, one of our disabled actors, accompanied by somebody from the technical staff, visited almost every venue that we were going to in order to find out whether they were accessible and, if not, whether we could do anything to make them better. We will carry out the same process this year. We ended up taking a touring ramp with us, which was simply something out of the back of a van, but it enhanced access. There are places that are not perfect, but it was still worth our while to go to small venues in all parts of Scotland. Although a lot of new-build small village halls are not ideal, they are on the flat, so people can get in.

I asked Access to Work to pay for an assistant to go out with a disabled actor, but it declined to pay because it did not believe that the actor would have the expertise to do the job but believed instead that the assistant would be doing the job. One can write only so many letters. Other work came up and I did not have the capacity to pursue the matter. That is the kind of thing that we are up against in carrying out the audits. We have a body of knowledge, which I would love to be able to disseminate. I would like to be able to create something that would be accessible to other people, but that would have resource implications; we would have to find project money to finance it.

There is also the issue of attitudinal access to venues. I walked into one place where it was assumed that I was the personal assistant of a disabled person, which is quite progressive. There was another incident when I, as the able-bodied person, was asked, "Is there only one with you?" I said that that was not how we worked and that we were a partnership. We challenge that sort of attitude.

On accommodation, there are sometimes only three or four bed and breakfasts where the company is going. They might say that they are accessible but we might discover, for example, that although there is a ramp, the carpet on it is so thick that a disabled person using a wheelchair could not push themselves up it because of the friction. What would somebody do if they faced that problem at 11 o'clock on a wet Thursday night after the show? It sounds as if I am talking about a lot of small details, but they can cause us real problems.

Tourist board symbols seem to be overly complicated and it is not clear what they mean in relation to access. I wonder whether any disabled people were involved in creating them. Perhaps they were; I do not know. A disabled person is the best person to conduct such audits and get the information out.

Richard Brickley: Forgive me for saying the same thing over and over again. Access is often said to be a huge barrier, but it is less of a barrier than people think. The smallest section of people with disabilities are chair users. I accept Morven Gregor's point that there are communication challenges, which we see as barriers. People who have severe mobility difficulties constitute the smallest section of our population with a disability. People who have learning difficulties and mental health problems do not have the same access problems.

There is never enough money to go round. I have worked for 31 years in a facility that has pretty poor access but which takes 40,000 to 45,000 people with special needs through its door in any one year. The staff attitudes are reasonably good; people like what they see and keep coming back—people with disabilities will vote with their feet. Access is a finance problem; we would all work in wonderful facilities if we had more money. We should not stop our people engaging in worthwhile programmes purely on the basis of physical barriers.

Nora Radcliffe: To what extent do the physical barriers still exist and what should we be doing to surmount them? The DDA was supposed to take care of the practicalities, but we obviously have a long way to go, so I would welcome suggestions about how we might do so. We have to tackle the perception that when we talk about access we mean that people have to be able to get in in a wheelchair. We have also to consider blind or deaf people or people with learning disabilities.

11:30

Fiona Wernham: The DDA has clarified our responsibilities with respect to access. We seconded a member of staff who had a disability to lead the DDA audit across Edinburgh Leisure, and there is now an action plan for every venue. However, that has taken time, as some of our older venues—the old branch baths such as Warrender swim centre and Glenogle swim centre—were designed 100 years ago, so access is particularly challenging and major refurbishment is needed. Nevertheless, we have real clarity on where we are going and how we are going to get there. Access is still a problem, but a lot more emphasis is being placed on it and organisations are considering it. It will take more time and resources to ensure that all our buildings are accessible, but people are doing a lot of positive work on accessibility.

Nora Radcliffe: Are you talking also about visual accessibility, by which I mean readable signs and that sort of thing?

Fiona Wernham: I mean everything, although I suppose those are the easiest issues to resolve. The problem is to ensure access for wheelchair users at the old baths, where there are 50 steps to get up.

Nora Radcliffe: Many of those issues do not get resolved. Even as an able-bodied person who has reasonable sight, I find that a lot of signage is in the wrong place—it is too high or too low—or it is too small or has a poor background or foreground.

Fiona Wernham: Absolutely.

Frank Keddilty: Like Edinburgh Leisure, we have audited our facilities. Our four main centres are DDA compliant, but we still have one or two outdoor sports changing facilities that require attention.

Perhaps the problem with the DDA is that it tends to focus on physical access although, as Richard Brickley said, the number of people who are in wheelchairs is relatively small. That brings us back to the question of accessing services. The fact that a swimming pool is built with a ramp going up into the pool does not mean that every individual who has special needs can go swimming, unless we go back to providing some additional support for the specific sessions.

I was interested to hear Morven Gregor's comments about theatres. Although I am confident that our facilities are DDA compliant, when we have groups in that contain a number of people with specific needs, we struggle to provide enough facilities. It is a big problem that we are dealing with facilities that are 30 or 40 years old and which were not designed for the purposes that they are serving now, never mind for access for the disabled. Maybe there should be only disabled toilets and no able-bodied toilets. Perhaps that would help to deal with the peaks and flows of individuals with special needs.

Ms White: You say that only a small proportion of disabled people are in wheelchairs. We are also talking about inclusiveness. Whether access relates to transport information or being able to get out and about, we should not look at it just as a disability issue.

You mentioned older people—they sometimes need ramps to help them if they use a stick, and they might also be visually impaired. Perhaps the situation should be more inclusive than merely saying that a lift is needed for wheelchair users; it could be needed for older people or for people who have young kids or prams. Would that be a better way of putting the message across? I realise that you get funding under the Disability

Discrimination Act 1995 and that you have to get funding from somewhere, but in a perfect world you should surely be able to explain that accessibility of transport—for example, buses that can lower their steps—also helps older people and young mums with kids to get on. It is not exclusively for wheelchair users or anyone else. If access was promoted in that way, perhaps a much more inclusive attitude would develop not just towards disabilities, but towards the whole population in respect of how people go through their lives.

The Convener: That is the kind of thing that we have been hearing from people.

Jan-Bert van den Berg: On the definition of disabilities, it is important to recognise that we work with people who have mental health problems and who do not necessarily describe themselves as disabled. They do, however, have additional support needs. It is easy to be clever and to say that we can always find a disability that is not being catered for. However, if we design really good services from the point of view of inclusiveness and try to ensure that those services address as many needs as we know about and can cater for, that would be an incredibly useful starting point.

Morven Gregor: Frank Keddilty mentioned numbers. The Birds of Paradise Theatre Company has historically performed at a theatre at Upper Springland in Perth, which is part of a community for disabled people. Perhaps there is a question whether an inclusive organisation should perform at such a venue, but we will continue to do so because that theatre is accessible for an audience of about 40 disabled people, whereas Perth Theatre in the town centre has space only for about two wheelchairs.

Richard Brickley: A report entitled "The Ticking Time Bomb" identified sports facilities around the country that are in desperate need of investment, which exemplifies the issue that arises with the DDA. Every local authority is committed to making facilities more accessible, but there is not enough money to do everything that people want. Most local authorities allocate money for which leisure managers must bid; people must make the case that their project is better than the next person's project. We recently applied to sportscotland for money for a facility that is well used by disabled people, but our application was unsuccessful because we were competing with every local authority in Scotland. In the context of securing physical access to leisure centres, there is not enough money to go round and the money that is available could be spent 10 times over. We have talked again and again about the attitudinal barriers and we can all influence attitudes. However, we can overcome physical barriers only up to a point; money must be generated.

Charlie Forbes: I endorse what Richard Brickley said. Last week, I took part in a discussion at a local leisure centre, which needs more than £3,000 to upgrade changing facilities to assist more severely physically disabled people. The centre simply does not have the money. That is an immediate barrier.

Marlyn Glen: Fiona Wernham mentioned doing an internet search of charities that provide funding. Can she give us more detail about that and perhaps the list of charities itself?

Fiona Wernham: We carried out the search in the past few days. We want to develop more services for people with support needs in sports such as trampolining and athletics and we are working with Lothian Disability Sport. Investment will be needed, so we carried out a basic internet search for charitable organisations that fund people who have support needs in various contexts, including sport. The search turned up the usual suspects, such as the BBC's Comic Relief, but we also found trusts that provide funding. I cannot remember names off the top of my head, but I will be more than happy to send the committee a list of the many charitable organisations that we found that make grants of between £1,000 and £25,000 for local work. We will progress the matter to try to get new programmes off the ground. Sustainability might be an issue, because such funding would be short term, but at least we might gather momentum for programmes. We managed to find quite promising opportunities for securing additional resources.

The Convener: It is hard work spending one's life looking for money, as I did in a previous role—I think that Morven Gregor is going to tell us that.

Morven Gregor: I am afraid so. We are lucky in that we get some of our income from trusts, but it is hard work and there is no magic wand. I do not know how sustainable such an approach is; an organisation gives us a grant one year and says, "Well, that's you. Thank you very much and we'll see you again in a few years' time," which does not provide stability for long-term planning and the continuation of projects. I want to put in place projects that will take five to 10 years to develop. For example, it takes a while for a disabled kid to move on from Ashcraig school to the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama and then on to our stage. Wee pockets of money all add up, but the process is hard.

Fiona Wernham: I agree with Morven Gregor. The issue will be how we deliver the programme in partnership with Capability Scotland. Capability Scotland has an inclusive leisure service model and it bases all the support that it provides to mainstream organisations such as ours on a sort of peer mentoring programme as opposed to direct provision, which means that we will step back and the young person will not have to do anything.

If we apply for funding through these channels, we will look to work in partnership in order to bring in the expertise that can give the support to young people to empower them to continue in some sort of leisure activity beyond the life span of the programme. We have been challenged to think a little bit differently, as opposed to just delivering a programme and saying, "That's it finished." We will have to work with experts from other organisations to support the young person's involvement beyond a particular project and in other areas.

Jan-Bert van den Berg: It might come as a surprise to Richard Brickley, but I agree with him. There is only so much money to go round. Income from trusts and foundations—from which we also benefit—is seen by the organisation as venture capital. As well as trying to define and develop a new bit of a service, we have to look at ways in which that can be made sustainable. That takes us back to Fiona Wernham's point. It is partly our own responsibility; it is not just somebody else's responsibility to fund the service. We have to examine how we can work in partnership and influence mainstream services to change. A better network sharing information about where resources can be found would be incredibly helpful. We are now very experienced in raising those types of funds, but there are many smaller voluntary organisations that are not. Where can they find that information? Where can they get help to get those small amounts of money that help their services to grow? That is sometimes overlooked.

The Convener: If there is a council for voluntary service in those organisations' area, it should be able to help with that. One of the big things that people have raised with us is access to information. How does someone with a disability find out where they can get involved in theatre? How do they find out how they can participate in sport, what their local authority is doing or what organisations are involved in?

Morven Gregor: I had not thought about it until it was pointed out to us, but many visually impaired folk find the internet incredibly useful. There is a software package—I cannot remember its name—that allows folk voice-controlled access to the internet. We use the internet quite a bit. We also have a newsletter for young folk that we send out.

Richard Brickley: A number of voluntary organisations specialise in working with people from certain communities—for example, people with sensory impairment, people with learning difficulties and people with mental health problems. Rather than duplicate the services that they offer, we tend to operate through the voluntary organisations, as they can produce information in formats that are appropriate for the particular individuals, which is unbelievably costly. If we are running conferences, for example, we will have an interpreter on board. That is extremely costly, but it is the least that we can do. As a sports organisation, we cannot afford to produce regular information bulletins in accessible formats, so we have taken the tack of going through the voluntary organisations that have direct links with people with specific conditions.

Frank Keddilty: Similarly, we deal with local groups. We also deal with social work for older people. There has to be a forum or venue for getting back comments such as those that you have made this morning about disabled access. We have to link with people who use the services, rather than the routine groups. We tend to deal with organisations or carers; we probably do not have enough face-to-face contact with individuals who have a disability to get genuine feedback from them. Improving communication and getting more information going back and forth would help us in trying to improve and develop the services that we provide.

Fiona Wernham: We were looking to put together a disability information section of our leisure website in order to put out some material, but we were not sure about the level of detail that is required. Should we provide more integrated information, as opposed to specific disability information? How do we take that forward? We asked Capability Scotland for its advice and it gave us screeds of recommendations. We are getting there, but we have been unsure whether we should separate the information or make it more integrated and, if we make it more integrated, how easy it would be for someone to find it. We are feeling our way to get the most appropriate method of communication to make it easier for people to get information. The support of experts in the area of sports provision has been very helpful.

11:45

Anne Knowles: Most of our programmes are oversubscribed, so we want to get the information out to make the case that they are worth while. The individuals on our mailing list continually receive mailings about what is happening, but we also try to push the information out through the organisations that offer housing support and through other types of disability support organisation. There is information on our website, and we send out leaflets and take part in conferences—for example an Enable Scotland conference or a key housing conference—at which artists with disabilities offer workshops. There are several methods of getting information out. There is information in written form, but there are also demonstration projects at mental health today and learning disability today conferences and places where we always offer workshops. In those projects, we are saying, “You too could be doing this,” and individuals see what is happening and can find out the information. Getting information out to people is perhaps the hardest thing to do.

Jan-Bert van den Berg: We produce newsletters in Braille and on tape and so on, but it is the networking that is an incredibly important, effective and cost-effective way of getting the message out. The disabled people we work with are surrounded by a range of carers or gatekeepers; getting that information out to those individuals is therefore incredibly important. It is a very cost-effective means—for once—of getting information out to the right people.

Charlie Forbes: Last year, thanks to some funding from Scottish Disability Sport through sportscotland, we managed to employ someone in the Highland active schools project, which is a programme for disability that is similar to the one in Fife. We are finalising work on the questionnaires that went out to parents, teachers, head teachers and pupils with learning needs, additional needs or physical disabilities. The idea is to build up a communications database so that information goes directly to people at home. We have found that if we send stuff for younger members to their resource centres or schools it never gets to them. We are taking a more direct approach—only time will tell how successful that will be. There are many groups out there. People are not tripping over one another, but we are crossing over. We have to try to produce a communication booklet for all the events in Highland that involve people with all types of disability, such as sensory impairment.

Ms White: I hope that I am not going off-beam—

The Convener: It is okay—I am about to open up the discussion.

Ms White: I wanted to ask about the benefits system. We all agree that we lead by example. If we saw more disabled people becoming teachers, actors and so on, people might be more inclined to do it too. Has the benefits system provided a disincentive for any of the witnesses to employ disabled people?

The Convener: Have any of your organisations been involved in employing disabled people?

Richard Brickley: I have no experience of the benefits system being a disincentive. All of us are passionate about our fields and are keen that people with disabilities should eventually become sports coaches or even just role models.

In Scotland, we are fortunate to have successful sportspeople who have been wonderful role models. I am the only non-disabled office-bearer in Disability Sport Fife, which is the organisation that I am representing today. We are also careful about gender equity and other equity issues in terms of how we run the organisation. Because we are passionate about the field in which we operate, such factors are prominent in our minds. In fact, we gave one of our top swimmers a job because he spent so much time in our leisure centre and we got fed up seeing him there. We are always trying to encourage individuals and develop their skills.

I have probably gone off at a tangent, but I cannot answer your question about disincentives. We are passionate about the employment of disabled people and about involving them in the services that we offer.

Morven Gregor: I employ disabled actors. Acting is not the most secure profession at the best of times, but folk still decide to do that job. Although the contracts are short-term ones, the fact that they tend to last between eight and 10 weeks means that it is worth somebody’s while to come off benefits and take a job that is offered to them. However, the situation gets a little trickier in relation to the tutor pool that we are developing. People who are employed in that regard will be more like freelance drama workers. Their employment will be sporadic: they will do half a day here and half a day there. I am not familiar with the ins and outs of the benefits system, but one young woman told me that she did not want to take part in our tutor pool because she was worried about losing her benefits. That is a tragedy, because it is a missed opportunity. I think that she decided to remain on jobseekers allowance, but a price had to be paid for that decision, which was that she could not take up the piece of work that she was offered. Some other people are able to take up the work because of the 16-hour rule, which means that they can work for up to 16 hours a week before their benefits are affected.

The Convener: This morning, we have been asking lots of questions. From your background papers, you will be aware that we are engaged in a fairly lengthy inquiry into the barriers that face disabled people in Scotland. In the next part of our discussion, I would like to ask our witnesses to tell us the issues that are faced by their organisations, how particular challenges have been overcome and, most important, what recommendations should be in our report. I would like to know what things have not come up so far that are important for the work of the organisations.

Bobby Kerr: Under the DDA, there are minimum standards for access—businesses must have ramps, colour-contrasted signs and so on—but I would like to know what people think about minimum standards for service delivery. For example, the model that is used in Fife is excellent; I would love to have that in West Dunbartonshire. It would be good if every local authority in Scotland had to have an officer whose remit was to look at disability issues in leisure, arts and so on. We do not have such an officer. Although I do some work in that regard as part of my job, I have a lot of other things to do and cannot devote to it the time that it requires. Might the Executive be able to insist that local authorities have such an officer? I do not know how the matter could be progressed, but it is important that there be minimum standards for service delivery.

Frank Keddilty: My breath has been taken away by the point about minimum standards for service delivery. I think that, from the point of view of our attempts to improve services for disabled people, the big issue is the allocation of specific funds for that purpose. In an environment in which pressure on finances is extreme and increasing, that is one of the major challenges that we face.

I agree with what Richard Brickley said about people paying for the services that they use. However, when an organisation is trying to cater for people with special needs, the ratio between customers and staff is not cost effective and such services will therefore require to be subsidised.

The Convener: Does anyone else have any ideas about what we should include in our report? I am getting really depressed, I have to tell you.

Richard Brickley: I will finish on a positive note. The fact that the committee is having the inquiry allows us the opportunity to offer our views, to bring many important issues into the public domain, to ask questions and to set up models of good practice. The committee is to be applauded for that. In my years of involvement, this is the first occasion that such an inquiry has ever taken place. Undoubtedly, we will all learn from one another. We will learn from the arts and the arts will learn from us. Local authorities will also learn from one another. The committee is to be applauded for what it is doing.

Jan-Bert van den Berg: I echo those remarks. The national programme for mental health and emotional well-being is one example of how the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Executive are making specific efforts to raise awareness of mental health issues. It will come as no great surprise to the committee to hear that I personally disagree with elements of that programme, but such an awareness-raising initiative and the investment stream that goes with it are a positive way of addressing issues. The Executive and the Parliament are to be congratulated on that. If we could replicate—not necessarily on the same scale—some of the networking, support and profile of that programme, that would be very helpful.

Morven Gregor: My plea is that inclusion should apply right across organisations rather than just to the little disability sector. Inclusion should not just be a box that is ticked as an add-on or supplement but something that applies day in, day out in every organisation. Perhaps inclusion issues should somehow be reflected in funding. If the big organisations monitored inclusion and based funding decisions accordingly, that might start to shake things up a wee bit.

My only other hope for the committee’s inquiry is that it has bite.

The Convener: As I understand it, inclusion should already be part of best value, but that is not happening as far as we can see. Clearly, we need to ensure that equalities are mainstreamed within organisations rather than regarded as an add-on. That is what we hope to achieve.

Morven Gregor: We need to be able to identify whether people are actually delivering inclusion. We need an holistic rather than a piecemeal approach.

Fiona Wernham: Today’s meeting has been valuable, as I have learned a lot from other organisations that are doing good work. Much positive work is already taking place and many organisations are being proactive. With so much more funding now going into sport and leisure, we start from a positive grounding.

One issue to consider is how we know how successful we have been in providing inclusive services. How do we measure the impact that we have had? For example, given that some people with additional support needs do not consider themselves disabled, how do we measure our progress? The challenge for us is to get baseline standards on what we are trying to measure, how we will measure it and how often it will be measured. We need to know whether we are making progress. If we had some sort of national framework for measuring impact, we would be able to see whether we were going in a positive direction. We receive a lot of good anecdotal feedback about our progress, but there is an issue over how we get evidence to show that.

The Convener: That is a good point. How do we know what still needs to be done? Organisations need to talk to disabled people to check that out.

Richard Brickley: Absolutely.

The Convener: People will need systems in place if they are to do that.

Frank Keddilty: Yes.

The Convener: Do the witnesses think that organisations should be given funding only if they have such systems in place?

Fiona Wernham: I should look to my colleagues to answer that. It is reasonable for funders to require a level of expertise. There needs to be a will to do it and a knowledge of how to do it.

The Convener: Do committee members have any further questions?

Elaine Smith: I have a question on Birds of Paradise Theatre Company's written submission. The final paragraph states:

> "just as Access to Work supports disabled people in employment, there could be an access to leisure entitlement".

Will Morven Gregor expand a bit more on her thoughts about that?

Morven Gregor: At the moment, the idea is a bit of an out-there kind of notion. A colleague came up with the phrase "access to leisure". The notion is that, just as a deaf person who needs a sign language interpreter for their job can get the costs paid by the access to work initiative, similar support should be available for attending arts activities of the sort that are supported by Jan-Bert van den Berg's projects. The access to work model could be applied to provide people with entitlements to the arts. We should perhaps start with young people. I heard recently that, during school holidays, school kids can receive packages containing all sorts of goodies, such as vouchers. Perhaps that could provide a starting point for encouraging folk to engage more with the arts, sport and other activities. We need some kind of wee incentive that says to people, "Yes, this is for you—you can do this." That is as far as I have got with the idea.

12:00

Elaine Smith: That is the kind of idea that we are trying to gather in our inquiry.

The Convener: Another label for that is cultural entitlements.

Morven Gregor: Yes.

Jan-Bert van den Berg: It will be interesting to see how those cultural entitlements are put into practice.

Marlyn Glen: Today's evidence session has been really helpful. It will encourage the committee in its scrutiny of the Scottish Executive's budget, which we always find difficult. It is important that the budget measures whether any value has been added in the promotion of equal opportunities. An important idea is that we should scrutinise funding streams. For instance, if the promotion of mental health and well-being is a Scottish Executive priority to which money has been allocated, it is important that the committee scrutinises whether that money is effective and is making a difference. That is a small thing that we need to do.

The Convener: I thank all the witnesses for their input, which has been very helpful. We are trying to get as much information as possible, so we find it helpful when people share information with us. I hope that the witnesses have also found this morning's session helpful. When our report becomes available in the summer, we will ensure that people get an opportunity to look at it.

Meeting closed at 12:02.

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