

EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE

Tuesday 2 May 2006

Session 2

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EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE

9th Meeting 2006, Session 2

CONVENER

*Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Nora Radcliffe (Gordon) (LD)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Frances Curran (West of Scotland) (SSP)

*Marilyn 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:

Andy Aitken (Annandale Transport Initiative)

John Chick (Teviot Wheels)

Trevor Docherty (Society of Chief Officers of Transportation in Scotland)

Frances Duffy (Transport Scotland)

Rosemary Everett (Scottish Parliament Visitor and Outreach Services)

Sheila Fletcher (Community Transport Association)

Stanley Flett (Aberdeen Accessible Transport Group)

Jan Goodall (Dundee Accessible Transport Action Group)

Ian Macnicol (Scottish Parliament Personnel Office)

Aneela McKenna (Scottish Parliament Corporate Policy Unit)

Trevor Meadows (Mobility and Access Committee for Scotland)

John Scott MSP (Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body)

Niall Smith (Caithness Rural Transport)

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 2 May 2006

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 09:34*]

Item in Private

The Convener (Cathy Peattie): Good morning and welcome to the ninth meeting in 2006 of the Equal Opportunities Committee. I remind all those present that mobile phones should be turned off completely, because they interfere with the sound system. I have received apologies from Elaine Smith and John Swinburne, and we expect Marilyn Livingstone to be late.

Item 1 is to consider whether to take in private item 4, which is discussion of our draft annual report. Is that agreed?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Scottish Parliament Equality Framework

09:35

The Convener: Item 2 is on the Scottish Parliament's equality framework. We are looking forward to hearing about the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body's equal opportunities report for 2005. I am pleased to welcome John Scott; Rosemary Everett, head of visitor and outreach services; Ian Macnicol, head of personnel; and Aneela McKenna, the Parliament's equalities manager. I extend a particularly warm welcome to Aneela, as this is her first visit to the committee.

We have a lot of material to get through this morning, so I will go straight to questions. I remind my colleagues to keep their questions short and I ask the panel to give us short answers—we would appreciate that.

Will you tell us more about the training that is provided to procurement staff on assessing suppliers' commitment to equal opportunities? How was the training developed and what did it include?

John Scott MSP (Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body): Thank you for inviting me here to give evidence on behalf of the corporate body. I echo your welcome to Aneela McKenna.

In the past year we have developed responsible purchasing procedures to ensure that equality issues are built into all contracting and procurement throughout the organisation. Equality considerations are included throughout various stages of the procurement process, which I regard as an excellent example of how we are embedding equality into the main activities of the Parliament. Aneela McKenna will give you further information on that.

Aneela McKenna (Scottish Parliament Corporate Policy Unit): To date, there has been no specific monitoring of the accessibility of committee meetings. However, for our annual report we ask each of our directorates to report on how it is considering equality issues. You can see good examples of that in the annual report.

In 2005 we delivered training to staff and contract managers covering how and at what stage to introduce responsible purchasing issues in the tendering process. The training included discussion of specific questions that could be asked of suppliers to assess their commitment to responsible purchasing, including equal opportunities.

The Convener: How is that monitored to see whether it is working?

Aneela McKenna: We have not monitored training, but we will be discussing it with the procurement office in the near future. I am new to the post. I could provide you with further information in writing. We will be considering how equality issues are included in the training for responsible purchasing.

The Convener: The committee would like to be kept up to date with such monitoring.

Nora Radcliffe (Gordon) (LD): Could we have a copy of the sorts of questions that people in procurement are being asked to ask their suppliers?

John Scott: Yes.

The Convener: It would be useful to have that information.

Aneela McKenna: We can certainly provide it.

Marlyn Glen (North East Scotland) (Lab): The committee notes the language training opportunities that are available to staff. Will that provision be continued?

John Scott: It will. The provision is very much on-going. Members will be pleased to hear that we are providing training in British Sign Language. Is that the issue on which you are seeking an answer?

Marlyn Glen: I was going to ask about it.

John Scott: It is part of our training strategy to encourage staff to sign up for language training, if in their current post they would benefit from an understanding of another language. A number of staff have benefited from BSL classes: 13 staff attended courses at various levels in 2005. Under the current language policy, which includes BSL, BSL training continues to be offered to staff. Typically, that training is delivered at four levels, from beginner to advanced. It is beneficial to staff who come into contact with individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing and who use BSL in their area of work.

Marlyn Glen: Could you say more about that? There is good uptake of BSL training at beginner level. How does the SPCB assist staff members to maintain and develop their skills once they have shown initial interest?

John Scott: We constantly review our policies and will shortly consider how best to maximise language training to support the equalities agenda in the Parliament. That will include the future provision of BSL training. Recently, we developed training for our public-facing staff to ensure that we communicate effectively with visitors who have different types of impairment, including those who are deaf and hard of hearing. We recognise the need to provide disabled people—whether they are members of the public, visitors, staff or

MSPs—with equal opportunities from the moment they enter the building, so that they are treated equally and are able to access our services and provision in the same way as non-disabled people.

Marlyn Glen: The committee notes that one of the action points for 2006 is the provision of disability awareness training for all front-line staff. Having commissioned research on that issue, the committee is interested in how the training has been developed. For example, has it been developed in conjunction with disabled people?

John Scott: Absolutely. I am pleased to report that it has been arranged that disability awareness training will take place during May and June. As I said earlier, our target group will consist mainly of all public-facing staff, which includes all visitor services staff, all security staff and some Sodexo staff. The training is available to all other SPCB staff. I can say a little more about that, if members wish. The training will cover aspects of disability etiquette, communicating effectively with disabled people, accessibility to our services, the physical environment and access to public information. We have identified those themes from feedback that has been received from users of the Parliament. The aim is to ensure that the staff who are the first point of contact for many visitors treat disabled people equally and without discrimination. Aneela McKenna can provide the committee with more detail.

Aneela McKenna: The training that we are providing will be mandatory for all public-facing posts. Recently, we ran a pilot session with the involvement of many service staff across the organisation. The training deals with many practical issues that relate to how we interact with disabled people and with accessibility issues. It also focuses on the social model of disability, which is concerned not with people's impairment but with the barriers that society creates for them.

Disabled members of the public were not involved in developing the training, but it was developed in conjunction with our disabled trainers. Both of our training presenters are disabled and will be able to bring their experiences of disability discrimination to the training. Once the training is complete, we will ensure that we visit team meetings to discuss its impact and to examine whether there has been any change to our practice at an individual and an operational level.

Marlyn Glen: Are you talking about front-line staff?

Aneela McKenna: Yes.

Marlyn Glen: Do you have plans for other members of staff?

Aneela McKenna: The training is open to all members of staff in the organisation, but we have

targeted those who are public facing, because they are the first point of contact for disabled people who come to the Parliament.

Mr Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Four levels of training have been mentioned. How long does it take for somebody to reach competence?

Aneela McKenna: The four levels are for British Sign Language training; the disability awareness training is two sessions of an hour and a half, so it takes three hours.

Mr McGrigor: That is what I meant.

Aneela McKenna: There is an hour and a half on disability etiquette and an hour and a half on accessibility.

Mr McGrigor: How long does it take people to reach competence in BSL?

09:45

Aneela McKenna: The BSL training is a much longer programme, with four levels, from beginner to advanced. I am not entirely sure how long the programme takes, but it is approximately 10 to 12 weeks.

Marlyn Glen: I refer the witnesses to the evidence that the committee took last week on disability equality training. Aneela McKenna talked about awareness training and etiquette training, which were covered in last week's informative and helpful evidence session. The point was made last week that the length of training that is required depends on the person's needs at the beginning of the training, so asking how much training is needed is like asking how long is a piece of string.

In oral evidence last year, the committee heard about the successful pilot of BSL interpretation at First Minister's question time. The equal opportunities report notes that the SPCB is reconsidering how it will provide that service. What is the current situation with that provision?

John Scott: You will recall that in 2004 there was a four-week pilot to consider the routine use of BSL interpreters for FMQs. The SPCB considered the use of BSL interpreters in September 2005 and decided not to provide the service routinely, largely because it would be a drain on what is an already stretched public resource. As members will be aware, there are only 40 fully qualified BSL interpreters in Scotland. Instead, we decided to continue with the current service of providing BSL interpreters automatically for debates or committee meetings that relate to deaf issues and on demand for other debates. In the past year, that system has worked well—we have received approximately 16 requests from various offices for different events and meetings.

We have agreed that we should investigate further whether technological solutions could provide the service or a similar one and whether that would be beneficial. Work is being done to advertise the current service more proactively. The service will be reviewed as part of the work that is under way to meet the new disability equality duties. Aneela McKenna will say a bit more about that, if members want. The SPCB considered the service, and although it was our desire to find a technological solution because of the shortage of BSL interpreters, we found that the technology did not yet exist. However, we are told that it is not far away from being ready. That was our best advice at the time.

Aneela McKenna: In our work on the disability equality scheme we will review all our current policies and procedures to determine how far we have progressed in promoting disability equality. As part of that, we will reconsider the provision of BSL interpreters for First Minister's question time. However, as John Scott said, there are few professionally trained BSL interpreters in Scotland, which might prove to be a difficulty should we reconsider our earlier decision and decide to arrange regular BSL interpretation. There is no guarantee that interpreters will be routinely available for every question time.

The Convener: Would the fact that interpreters were visible at First Minister's question time encourage other people to learn BSL?

John Scott: That is an interesting idea. If that could be proved, the corporate body would be happy to consider it. At the moment, we have to decide whether it is more important for a BSL interpreter to be available to accompany someone to a hospital or doctor's appointment or to be at First Minister's question time. Both are important but, given that only 40 interpreters are available in Scotland, they are a scarce resource that is not to be squandered.

Ms Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP): There is a dearth of BSL interpreters. I attended a meeting in Glasgow a couple of months ago where I asked questions about the new technology that has been introduced. A six-month pilot scheme was undertaken in London whereby interpreters were video recorded, so that even people up in the islands who needed interpretation could have it. I could look out the organisation that did that and pass that information on to the corporate body.

John Scott: The corporate body is monitoring such developments, but we would welcome any information that you could provide.

Ms White: The process was piloted in England for six months. I do not know how it would work here, but I would be happy to pass on the information.

The Convener: There is also a good project in my constituency, which runs a similar programme.

John Scott: Aneela McKenna would welcome any information that you could provide on that.

Nora Radcliffe: The committee notes that various measures have been employed to make the Parliament more accessible, both to those who participate in parliamentary business and to those who visit the Parliament. What feedback are you getting on the accessibility of the Holyrood building, following the changes that have been made?

John Scott: Several new mechanisms have been introduced that help us to evaluate our services and the accessibility of the building more effectively. Most of the feedback that we have received has been positive, but some access issues have been highlighted. Although most of them had already been identified, the responses we received have been extremely useful in helping us to identify areas in which we need to improve. That has led to some access improvements being made within the past year. This is Rosemary Everett's field of expertise, so she will give you more detail.

Rosemary Everett (Scottish Parliament Visitor and Outreach Services): The main improvement that we have made in the past year is the formal questionnaire for visitors that we have placed in the main hall and in other areas of the building since September. It allows us routinely to gather mainly quantitative and qualitative information, although there is a free comments box on the questionnaire that captures people's views on the accessibility of the building.

As John Scott said, it is encouraging that we are receiving repeat comments on issues that we have identified, and we are working with the equalities team to address them. We are also picking up new issues and specific instances—whether from visits or from events—and addressing them as they come up. The visitor services review for the SPCB, which was completed in October, made use of a separate questionnaire. We will learn from it and from the questionnaire that we have put out. As part of implementing the visitor services review, we will enhance the public questionnaire to gather more information on equal opportunities issues to improve our monitoring of them.

We will also continue with some of the other formal mechanisms with which members might be familiar. One of those is the facilities management dashboard, which picks up on a lot of issues relating to the services that we provide in the building, such as cleanliness. We are also beginning to analyse the uptake of the public information leaflets that we have in the main hall,

so that we can monitor how well the formats that we provide are being used, the languages of the leaflets that are most picked up, and so on.

Nora Radcliffe: I presume that the same mechanisms are used to monitor the accessibility of events that are held at the Parliament.

Rosemary Everett: Yes. In January, we introduced a formal evaluation form, so each event is now being monitored through feedback from the external event host and the internal sponsor, who is usually an MSP, which gives us views from two sides. We receive an awful lot of verbal feedback on events from people on the night. We are picking up on a lot of the issues with the equalities team and, with the events management team, we are dealing with them as we can.

John Scott: We need to approach this area with humility. We are not an events management organisation, but events management is becoming more of a requirement in the Parliament. We are learning as we go, but we are doing so positively. I am very content that Rosemary Everett and her team are doing everything they can to address foreseen issues and issues as they arise.

Marlyn Glen: A specific question about the main public area has been brought to my attention. Have you had any feedback from people with breathing difficulties? When one particular group visited the Parliament, there was a perception that it was difficult to catch one's breath in the public entrance hall.

John Scott: Was that the chronic obstructive pulmonary disease people? I attended the function on COPD, but I was not aware of any such difficulty. Were you aware of it, Rosemary?

Rosemary Everett: No, I do not think that that has been formally captured as a piece of feedback. However, we would be happy to receive more information on that.

John Scott: We would welcome Marlyn Glen giving further input to Rosemary Everett. It would be useful if you could provide some specifics, Marlyn.

The Convener: When I was taking a visitor round recently, I was really surprised when I located the garden-level meeting room in which she could breastfeed her baby. It looked like it had been used as a coffee room or something; it was an absolute shambles. We could not find a room in which the baby could be breastfed, and she ended up being breastfed in my office with the blinds down. I was really surprised and disappointed by that.

John Scott: I am surprised by that too. Thank you for drawing that to our attention. I was not aware of it and—I dare say, from the look on her face—Rosemary Everett was not aware of it either.

Rosemary Everett: Two rooms are set aside for nursing mothers. One is a fairly discreet room adjacent to the crèche, and it should always be available. The second room has been used as a meeting room and a temporary office, but—

The Convener: It is a mess.

Rosemary Everett: I believe that plans are now in place to convert the room back to its original, intended purpose. It will become the second nursing mother room.

The Convener: The other room was not available, and the room that we tried was a mess. However, that is good news.

Nora Radcliffe: Are there mechanisms for recording comments made by visitors to security staff, for example? Is there a way of capturing that informal feedback in addition to the formal mechanisms?

Rosemary Everett: The security staff are very good at forwarding the comments that they receive, either verbally to us at the visitor services desk in the main hall or by e-mail. For evening events in particular, we find e-mails the next morning that capture what went on. Security staff are represented on the events management team, which meets every Friday, and we tend to go over what has happened with events at those meetings. As far as visitor services is concerned, there is more of a daily discussion about what is going on.

Nora Radcliffe: That is good.

John Scott: Ian Macnicol has pointed out to me that it is open to members to log complaints with the helpdesk should situations arise at events. If members are aware that people have found themselves in difficulty, we would naturally welcome their input.

Nora Radcliffe: Do you have evidence on whether committee meetings that are held outwith the Parliament are accessible?

John Scott: We do. A lot of good work has been done across offices over the past year to check for accessibility when arranging meetings or events. The annual report, of which the committee has a copy, highlights some of the examples of good practice with external committee meetings in particular. The committee best practice manual, which is used by the committee clerks, provides detailed information on accessibility and on issues that need to be considered when arranging internal and external meetings. Committee clerks are expected to follow the guidance to ensure that committee meetings are inclusive and fully accessible. Aneela McKenna has more information on that.

10:00

Aneela McKenna: To date, there has been no specific monitoring of the accessibility of external committee meetings, but we ask each director to record in the annual report how equalities issues are considered. Some good examples are highlighted with regard to external committee meetings. We hope to improve on the situation when we introduce our impact assessment process in the next year. The Parliament will be able to use that tool at the outset to check for adverse impacts when a policy is being devised, an event is being planned or a practice is being developed. We will check whether that is working by collecting all the impact assessment reports. We are required to do that by legislation, particularly the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000, and we must publish the information that we gather. That information will enable the situation to be monitored.

Nora Radcliffe: Last week, the committee discussed the use of mystery shoppers to evaluate accessible provision. Has that idea been taken forward?

John Scott: It has not. We have not implemented the mystery shopper programme because we are confident that the feedback mechanisms that are in place are working and we do not believe that it is needed. In that regard, we have taken a number of positive steps towards improving our review and feedback processes. A wide range of mechanisms has been developed across various functions, including visitor services, events, the committee office and the education service, and we have paid attention to the correspondence that we have received from members of the public and organisations.

As you will be aware, Nora, our recent review of visitor services and events gives us an opportunity to examine further the systems that are in place and to determine the extent to which they address equality issues. Rosemary Everett and Aneela McKenna might want to talk a little bit more about that.

Aneela McKenna: We will be required actively to involve disabled people in the development of the disabilities equality scheme, which is one of our key areas of work in the next six months. That will provide an additional excellent opportunity for direct input from disabled people to help us review and develop our policies and practices.

Nora Radcliffe: So we are using real shoppers, not mystery ones.

Aneela McKenna: Indeed.

Ms White: You said that you were confident about the feedback mechanisms. However, feedback from the guided tours shows that certain

issues, particularly those relating to recorded audio tours, are not being addressed. Your report says that you will not have a remedy in place until, perhaps, 2007. Why did front-of-house work take priority over that issue, considering that it was flagged up as a problem in 2004?

John Scott: I should perhaps apologise to the committee in that regard. In the past year, pressure of work that has been created by the visitor services and events review has meant that specific work on making the tours more accessible, in terms of the equalities issues that you raise, has still to be done. That work will form part of the action plan as part of the visitor services and events review. That is a huge piece of work that is being done at the moment. The equalities team will ensure that equalities issues are taken on board during that work and injected into that plan. The accessibility of the tours will certainly be considered in that regard, particularly with regard to the audio issues that you raise.

Some improvements have been made this year. However, given that we have a small and compact team—it is made up of Mairi Pearson and Aneela McKenna—I have to say that, having only recently been given this brief, I am absolutely amazed at how much has been achieved in what seems to me to be a relatively short space of time. We will get there; I apologise for the fact that we are not there yet.

Ms White: Can you give us a timescale? Rosemary Everett has spoken about the materials that will be used and the fact that the information will be presented in various styles. However, the feedback emphasised the issue of recorded audio tours. Why was that issue not incorporated into your examination of front-line services?

Rosemary Everett: The timescale for the introduction of an audio tour is fairly flexible. I am sure that you are aware that the standard guided tours have been running since October 2004 and, in the shorter term, we aim to improve their accessibility to deaf or hard-of-hearing people by looking at portable induction loops that can be introduced to go around with the guide.

One of the challenges that we face in managing visitors within the building lies in identifying what added value an audio tour would bring to the visitor experience and what we would be trying to achieve by its introduction. Developing and introducing an audio tour, and purchasing the equipment, would be fairly costly, so the SPCB would have to be satisfied that such a tour would be the right visitor management solution for us. An alternative would be to continue to offer personal tours that are led by a guide and to improve their accessibility.

Ms White: Obviously you have to answer to the Parliament for the money that you spend, which

will be documented. However, the feedback that the SPCB received showed that the tours are one of the areas in which people who are hard of hearing are not getting a service. You say that something might be implemented in 2007. Is there a timescale for that?

John Scott: It might be better if we were to write to the committee with a considered response rather than giving an off-the-cuff answer that would not be adequately researched. We will come back to you on that.

Ms White: Thank you.

The Parliament's crèche has been the subject of debate among MSPs who have kids and others. We note that pass holders as well as visitors can now use the crèche, and that that pilot scheme will run for six months. What is the background to that decision? What assurances can you give us about the future of the crèche? When the Parliament first opened, the provision of a crèche for workers, MSPs and visitors was an excellent and forward-thinking exercise. I would like to have a wee bit of background knowledge and some assurance for the future, because I would hate anything to happen to the crèche.

John Scott: You are in luck; I have the background report with me. In 2005, the SPCB set up an advisory group to consider options for maximising the opportunities that were offered by the Parliament's public crèche facility. Indeed, Nora Radcliffe chairs that advisory group; she probably knows more about it than anyone.

In an interim report to the SPCB in February, the advisory group proposed that use of the crèche should be extended to all pass holders on a trial, paid-for basis. Although pass holders have always been able to use the crèche in an emergency, the trial extends that provision while ensuring that there is adequate provision for visitors and maximising the use of the crèche facility.

The SPCB agreed the proposal and take-up by pass holders will be evaluated during and after the six-month period. The information will be used to inform the group's report to the SPCB in October 2006.

On the future of the crèche, the SPCB continues to consider all options for maximising the opportunities that it offers.

Ms White: Use of the crèche increased last year. You say that you will report in October on the six-month trial. Has the crèche been advertised more than it was previously? As I said, I think that it is an excellent facility and I would not like to lose it, even if we have to consider SPCB money and that type of thing. Can you give me any information about how the service has been advertised more during the pilot than it was before so that maximum use can be made of it?

John Scott: I cannot give you any specific information about how much more the crèche has been advertised, but I am certainly aware that it has been advertised more than it was.

Whenever the SPCB discusses the crèche—which seems to happen on a not-irregular basis—people say that they do not know about it. We are constantly trying to find ways of advertising it. When committee papers are issued and witnesses are invited to attend committees, to the best of my knowledge information is included about the availability of the crèche facility.

Others may differ, but I take the view that coming to the Parliament, whether to give evidence or as a visitor, is often a special event for people, which is why many of them make their own arrangements and leave their children at home. That said, we are determined to keep on the crèche, but it is still under discussion and evaluation. The question is the best way to proceed. The report and the review will be concluded by October 2006 and we will come to a view on the crèche thereafter.

Ms White: Is the availability of the crèche advertised on the Parliament's website? Do you have any sneak figures to show whether the numbers have increased?

John Scott: Rosemary Everett might be better informed in that regard.

The Convener: Any sneak figures, Rosemary?

Rosemary Everett: I do not know whether I have got sneak figures, but the crèche is definitely on the website. We have increased the amount of information in the marketing leaflet that we issue to community and other information outlets throughout Scotland. We have done the same with the public information leaflets that people can pick up here. The visitor services team has been briefed to ask whether visiting families wish to use the crèche. The most noticeable increase in numbers using the crèche was around doors open day in September last year, which was the first time that the facility had been open to the public on a Saturday. Numbers increased dramatically as a result of a specific advertising initiative and figures are gradually climbing. It is too soon into the pass holder pilot scheme for us to be able to tell what the effect of that will be, but we hope that it will generate more usage.

Marlyn Glen: The committee welcomes the move by the personnel office to sponsor a black and ethnic minority job fair last year. What other work is planned to promote the Parliament as an inclusive employer?

John Scott: In conjunction with the equalities team, the personnel office is well aware of the need to be proactive in the recruitment of staff

from underrepresented groups, mainly from black and minority ethnic communities. Ian Macnicol is our expert in that area and will provide examples of the further work that we plan to undertake.

Ian Macnicol (Scottish Parliament Personnel Office): We take that issue very seriously. The main way in which we ensure that we reach black and ethnic minority potential employees is through the use of our equalities distribution list, which we have expanded over the past year. It comprises organisations such as all the racial equality councils in Scotland, Ethnic Minority Enterprise Centre in Glasgow, Skillnet Edinburgh, Lothian Employers Network on Disability, Hanover (Scotland) Housing Association and the Jobcentre Plus disability services team. We send all our vacancies out to those organisations. This year, like last year, we are sponsoring the annual black and ethnic minority job fair, which is run by Trust Housing Association. We are participating in this year's event in June. We are forging an active relationship with Trust Housing Association in its new venture, equalityscotland.com, and we have added the THA to our distribution list. We are also forging an active relationship with Jobcentre Plus's employer management team, with the specific aim of increasing engagement with minority groups and communities.

Last year, we implemented revised recruitment and selection training for people who will potentially appear on selection panels. Equalities issues are mainstreamed throughout the course, so it is not just a case of us dipping in and saying, "Remember about such and such." The course has been structured to ensure that we see beyond what is presented and try to see the person behind it on the range of equalities issues.

Marlyn Glen: Thank you for that detailed answer. The committee notes that the recruitment procedures review was deferred to this year. Can we be assured that that work will not be subject to further delays? What is the current timescale for the review?

John Scott: You are right in saying that the formal review has been deferred, but the process has been kept under continuous review. The purpose of the review is to consider the effectiveness of the Parliament's recruitment process in delivering the right staff to meet the organisation's business needs rather than to consider matters from an equalities perspective, although equalities issues and inputs are integral to the review. Perhaps Ian Macnicol can give more details about the improvements that have been made in that regard in the past two years.

10:15

Ian Macnicol: I reiterate what John Scott has said. Our recruitment procedures are not broke—

we have an effective method of bringing people across the threshold. However, the review's purpose was to look beyond the horizon. Should we use different techniques, for example? Should we use assessment centres, questionnaires and so on? The review's purpose was not to consider equalities specifically because we think that we have that aspect more or less nailed.

We have made improvements as we have proceeded. The improvements that have been implemented in the past two years include the application of best practice on filling vacancies at the outset, which the Disability Rights Commission has produced; a more rigorous approach to specifying the requirements for jobs, which focuses on relevant skills and experience rather than relevant qualifications; revised training for those who are involved in recruitment, which I mentioned; and changes to our pre-employment inquiry process to avoid discrimination when identity checks are being done. In addition, we will soon use a new application form and entirely revise our guidance and information for applicants and those who are involved in the selection process. My recruitment manager, Dominic Johnston, will work with Aneela McKenna with a view to ensuring that we make any further changes that we need to make in anticipation of the discrimination legislation that is being introduced so that we know that we are on top of things.

Mr McGrigor: The committee has noted the positive measures that the SPCB is undertaking as part of the work-life balance policy and the adjustments for staff. What measures are in place to assess how those schemes are working? Can the SPCB do anything more to provide an accessible environment for its staff?

John Scott: The work-life balance range of policies that the corporate body has introduced has been well received by staff in the past year, and several requests have been supported. Many details about those policies are included in the report, but Ian Macnicol will go into more detail on them.

Ian Macnicol: John Scott has anticipated my response. Rather than going through all the detailed information in the report, I will be brief.

In the past 12 months, we have received five applications for career breaks, all of which have been supported. There have been three applications for reduced-hours working, all of which have been approved; formal applications have also been made for part-time working, job-sharing, compressed-hours working and working from home. In addition, managers of business areas regularly approve ad hoc, informal arrangements, which never come anywhere near my office. A person might simply want a different

pattern of work, which is agreed to informally. That is happening throughout the Parliament.

We try desperately hard to agree to different work patterns and to support staff when their needs change. If an unusual request is made, my modus operandi or first reaction in the personnel office should be to ask, "How can we make this work?" We try to strike a balance between what we can do for a worker and what the business needs. Occasionally, business needs must prevail, of course, but we are able to say yes to by far the majority of requests.

Mr McGrigor asked how we measure how our schemes are working. We have conducted one staff satisfaction survey; the plan is to conduct another survey after two years. In that survey, we received excellent feedback on the satisfaction of staff with the SPCB as an employer. I think that 91 per cent said that they are proud to work for the corporate body and for the Parliament—I was going to say not to quote me on that figure, but I know that I will be quoted; I will check it—and more than 80 per cent of people said that they would recommend the Parliament as an employer. That is one way of measuring whether we are getting things right. Anecdotally, people come up to me and tell me that the terms and conditions for staff are marvellous and talk about our flexibility when employees' circumstances change.

In addition, we have a policy of conducting exit interviews when people leave. We do not report on that, but my staff go through a fairly sophisticated process to check out whether people are leaving for the right reasons, and we do not have any sense that people are leaving because we are unable to support their work-life balance.

Aneela McKenna: I must just correct Ian Macnicol. In fact, more than 90 per cent of staff recommend the Parliament as a good employer.

Ian Macnicol: I am so modest that I did not want to boast.

Mr McGrigor: The committee has noticed that the second equal opportunities staff audit will be published shortly. What are the key findings from that audit?

John Scott: As Ian Macnicol and Aneela McKenna have said, more than 90 per cent of staff—a total of 472 members of staff—completed the questionnaire, which helps to give us a comprehensive picture of how well we are doing. The vast majority of findings from the report were positive, with more than 90 per cent of the 90 per cent who responded saying that they would recommend the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body as an employer, and 80.3 per cent saying that the SPCB is doing all that it can to implement equal opportunities. The staff, the Parliament and those who have been managing the process are to be congratulated.

Obviously, there are some issues that we need to address further. Aneela McKenna will give you some more details about how we will do that; I have raised with her recently one issue in particular that has concerned me. The report stated that 17.2 per cent of respondents said that they had not received sufficient training—that was an increase on the figure from the 2003 audit, when the figure was only 10 per cent—and although that is not an equalities issue, it needs to be addressed. If one in six of our staff—or something approaching that figure—feel that they are not sufficiently trained, something needs to be done about it, although that is not a point for discussion today.

Aneela McKenna will give you more information on the audit.

Aneela McKenna: As John Scott says, there are no major concerns, but we have picked up some areas in which further development is needed. One of the areas that were highlighted was to do with harassment and bullying, and although there has been a further reduction in the number of staff who said that they felt that they had been bullied and harassed—down from 13.2 per cent to 10.6 per cent, which is good—we must still take proactive steps to ensure that we are preventing harassment and bullying in the workplace. In conjunction with the personnel office, we have agreed to examine some areas that we can develop and to work on guidance for staff, particularly managers, in that area. We are also considering training for managers and we will be reviewing the dignity at work policy and developing the role and remit of the dignity at work contacts.

There has been a fall in the number of staff who felt that their career progression was affected by their particular characteristics. That is the term that is used in the report to highlight those groups who may suffer more discrimination than others because of their race, disability, age, gender or sexual orientation. There has been a slight change in the age profile of staff in the organisation, and there are now no staff under the age of 20. That may be a natural consequence of the aging workforce, with staff remaining and progressing in the organisation, but we take that issue seriously and we will consider a modern apprenticeship programme to encourage more school leavers to join the organisation. We will also examine our recruitment and selection procedures, particularly the person and job specifications, to check whether there is any discrimination against younger people.

John Scott referred to the question on sufficient training. The personnel office is picking up on that through the learning and development strategy that it is developing.

Marlyn Glen: I have a follow-up question about dignity at work. It is important that the Parliament sets an example to other employers. The aim is to ensure that no one feels harassed or bullied, but perhaps it is too idealistic to expect that 0 per cent of employees will experience harassment or bullying. Do you have a comparative, average figure for other employers?

Aneela McKenna: For the percentage of employees who experience harassment and bullying?

Marlyn Glen: Yes.

Aneela McKenna: The figure for my previous employer was 25 per cent, which would be an approximate average for other organisations. The 10 per cent figure in the Parliament is not that bad. Bullying and harassment exist in hierarchical organisations, but even though the figure is lower than the average for other organisations, we cannot ignore it.

Mr McGrigor: Did you manage to evaluate the dignity at work programme?

Aneela McKenna: The dignity at work contacts or the programme?

Mr McGrigor: I know that it was your intention to evaluate the dignity at work network as part of your audit.

John Scott: The network is what we regard as the contacts. The contacts were set up on the basis of the findings of the 2003 audit to provide support and information to other members of staff who feel that they have been harassed or bullied or who have experienced discrimination. In the 2005 equality audit, we asked staff about the dignity at work contacts, to assess whether the service that they provide has been effective. We have received a generally positive response about the service, although only 3.5 per cent of the staff said that they had used it. That is, of course, encouraging. It could be interpreted as meaning that staff do not have issues in relation to their work life that they need to take to a dignity at work contact. However, we are not complacent because the low level of feedback could be a result of lack of awareness of the contacts. To ensure that we fulfil our role as a caring employer, we propose to undertake further publicity and promotion of the dignity at work network. Aneela McKenna has more details on that.

Aneela McKenna: In evaluating the network, we work closely with the dignity at work contacts and investigating officers to find out how people use the service and what training the contacts need to support them. I met the contacts and investigating officers for the first time last week and we discussed their development and how staff could be made more aware of the network.

The contact feedback forms that we receive from the dignity at work contacts show that approximately 30 staff have either phoned or met a dignity at work contact.

We will ensure that staff are aware of the support that is available to them. We will produce a lot of publicity and undertake promotion of the network in the coming year. We will also provide refresher training to the dignity at work contacts, who have been performing the role for two years now, to help them in situations in which they might have to deal with an alleged harasser.

We will also review the current procedures for investigation in the organisation to see how they are working.

The Convener: The report highlights that the implementation of recommendations from the equal pay audit is still on-going. What is the timescale for the completion of the exercise?

John Scott: We have implemented most of the recommendations resulting from the audit, as you will be aware. Ian Macnicol will outline the remaining timescales.

10:30

Ian Macnicol: Most of the information is set out in the report. We have either met, or are in the process of meeting, all the major recommendations. Members will remember that we were assessed against a number of tests and that a red, amber or green tag was given on each one. We did not get any reds and we got only one amber, so we got mostly greens.

The only amber tag was on our pay supplements and allowances, so we are focusing our attention on that issue. We are working closely with our trade union side colleagues on the bespoke pay benchmarking exercise that is taking place. I expect the exercise to be completed by the time that we settle our pay deal for the coming year, which starts in August. That should be done by 1 August, although the timeframe may slip a little. Our grading arrangements are based on internal relativities, but when we are out of kilter with an external relativity we can give a pay supplement. Those supplements are also under review. That was the main area of contention and we are sorting the matter out.

Only three recommendations were not delivered upon at all. One was a simple one relating to gender balance in the performance achieved under the performance appraisal arrangements. We were going to get Towers Perrin, who did the original exercise, to reproduce the test using our next set of appraisal reports. That was not done, but I have asked for it to be done. An assumption was made that we should not have such a report

done because we had done the work ourselves, but in the two years since the review was done there has been no bias in the allocation of exceptional markings. In fact, there are more men than women in the organisation but more women than men are getting exceptional markings, so if there is any bias it may well be in favour of women. However, the difference in the figures is so small that we think it is probably statistically insignificant. We are addressing the matter, but not by the means that were indicated in the report.

Another recommendation that was not delivered concerned the planned review of recruitment, which has been deferred. One of the tests was that we should have regard to the gender balance in an office when we decide whether to fill a post internally or externally. We were going to combine the issue with the recruitment review, but clearly we can take the matter into account as we go. There are very few offices in which there is a distinct gender imbalance. We would certainly be able to take that into account in the recruitment process. The suggestion in the report is that we should opt for external recruitment for offices in which there is a gender imbalance, because there is more chance of addressing the gender imbalance by going to the external market, whereas if we use the internal market we might compound the issue. However, we can address the matter without a recruitment review so the fact that we have not had one is not a big deal.

The other recommendation on which we have not delivered concerned the development of a set of annual statistics for directors, focused on gender distribution. Bearing in mind that we did not get any ambers or reds on the issue, that was not seen as a big deal. We are conducting a more fundamental look at the way in which we deliver management information and we have lumped the issue in with that. However, that review will take longer to deliver. We have not delivered on those three matters, but we are taking steps to address them.

The Convener: We would like to be kept up to date with progress.

Ian Macnicol: Okay.

Mr McGrigor: The SPCB has published its revised race equality scheme. What measures did it take to update the scheme and how did it monitor progress against the original action plan?

John Scott: The race equality scheme has recently been reviewed to identify what has been achieved in the past three years. Aneela McKenna is new to the post of equalities manager and one of her key jobs will be to review the race equality scheme and ascertain how well we are meeting the general and specific duties of the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000. Aneela has more information on the matter.

Aneela McKenna: Although there has been a review of what we have achieved under the scheme, there is a need for a further review to establish how well black and ethnic minority staff, visitors and organisations think we are doing. That will be our next step in the development of the scheme and it is one of the key matters that I am considering.

Mr McGrigor: What preparations are being made for the implementation of the disability equality duty and the gender equality duty? For example, how will the SPCB consult disabled people on its disability equality scheme?

John Scott: A paper was recently provided to the senior management team on the new disability equality duty. We recognise that legislative changes will require us to promote disability equality proactively, mainly in how we undertake our day-to-day business. Plans are under way to develop the scheme and an action plan has been put in place to help us to prepare for the new duty's requirements. The equalities team will lead on that and the involvement of almost all offices throughout the organisation will be expected.

Aneela McKenna: I can talk about the consultation with disabled people, which is an exciting project that will take place in the next six months. Close involvement with disabled people will very much be part of developing the scheme. We intend to do that in as many ways as possible and we will try to be as creative as possible in how we get people to work with us.

There are several options. We are considering information technology options such as web questionnaires and an online forum. Mairi Pearson and I will speak to as many disabled people's organisations as possible and will visit organisations to talk about different impairments. We will also work with disabled staff in the organisation. We will certainly be keen to tap into the groups with which the committee has been involved for its disability inquiry. That would be useful for us in obtaining feedback. Lots will happen in the next few months on which we will be able to report to the committee later.

Mr McGrigor: How is the SPCB preparing for the implementation of the age discrimination legislation? Does the organisation face any particular challenges?

John Scott: Aneela McKenna will talk about the challenges. Suffice to say that we have started to make some progress in relation to the age discrimination legislation. The personnel office and the equalities team are working closely to ensure that we meet all the requirements. Aneela will fill you in on the detail.

Aneela McKenna: Equalities legislation always presents new challenges. One of the main issues

for us is ensuring that young people are better represented in the organisation. We must ensure that our equalities framework and our personnel policies comply with the legislation. We must also ensure that staff understand their new responsibilities under the legislation, particularly in relation to how we communicate and behave with one another—for example, in the jokes that we make about old and young people and in the birthday cards that we send. Such behaviour can offend people, so adhering to the legislation is also very much a communication exercise for staff.

Ms White: You mentioned encouraging young people, which is right, but I want to ask whether the retirement age for Scottish Parliament staff has been raised. Is it not the case that people who are aged even about 58 cannot obtain a job in the Parliament, because the retirement age is 60? Have you addressed that in preparing for the age discrimination legislation?

Ian Macnicol: When we started, the normal retirement age for staff was 60. When we put the equality framework in place, the corporate body decided to raise that age to 65. That meant that people could retire at 60 but would not be required to retire until 65. We made that change before the age discrimination legislation was on the horizon.

We do not tend to sift out people by reason of age. A person would probably have to be 63 before we might sift them out under the current arrangements. When the retirement age was 60, the relevant age was 58; the relevant age is now 63. We would still appoint someone who was in their 60s. However, as Aneela McKenna has said, we are to consider that with a view to ensuring that our position is cast iron by the time that the legislation is in force.

Another way in which we have anticipated the legislation is that this year's review of our staff handbook was done with a view to the changes that we expect to come when the age discrimination legislation hits the statute book. We have changed the staff handbook sufficiently so that, when it comes to the bit, we will not have to make too many changes. We are good at getting matters right in relation to the end of people's careers. However, like Aneela McKenna, I think that perhaps we do not do enough at the early stages. We perhaps expect too much of people who come across the threshold. We could probably do more to bring in young people and give them skills, rather than requiring the skills up front.

John Scott: A balance will need to be struck on that, as there are conflicting priorities—those of the young and the old. We are well aware of the problems but, as Ian Macnicol said, we have them in hand.

Nora Radcliffe: To clarify, are SPCB staff obliged to retire at 65, or is that just the normal retirement age?

Ian Macnicol: At the moment, we expect staff to retire at 65, unless they ask to stay on beyond that. The normal retirement age is 65. When people are 64, we give them notice that they will retire when they are 65, although we tell them that they can apply to stay beyond that. Even at the normal retirement age, we do not chuck people out the door. If people genuinely want to stay on, they can make a case for that. That approach will continue.

Nora Radcliffe: Will there be a limit on the extension of working life?

Ian Macnicol: I do not think so. I expect that, under the legislation, we will have to be able to justify objectively why somebody is staying or going. I believe that we need a retirement age, so that everybody knows what they are aiming for. However, if someone feels able to work and we think that they can do so, based on objective criteria, such as performance assessment, attendance and conduct, there is no reason why they should not stay on in employment, as long as they want to and we can provide a job.

Ms White: We have dealt with the retirement issue, but I want to know about recruitment. Until a couple of years ago, a person would not have been recruited in the Scottish Parliament if they were over 50 or 55. The policy was ambiguous, but people would not have been recruited.

The Convener: I think that Ian Macnicol has answered that.

Ian Macnicol: Yes, I have.

Ms White: Sorry.

Mr McGrigor: Duncan McNeil's letter to the committee of 10 June 2005 shows that a joint race and disability scheme was at one point being considered. Are you still considering such a scheme and, if so, will it be extended to cover gender and age equality?

John Scott: Again, I have a confession to make—I seem to be landed with the confessions. Because of time constraints, to develop the first draft of the disability equality scheme by October 2006, we will have to proceed with separate equality schemes in the meantime. We plan to develop a single equality scheme that includes the schemes on race, gender and age. Those will be amalgamated into one scheme when the gender equality duty comes into effect and the new commission for equality and human rights is set up in 2007. The equalities team will lead on that. The work is in hand, but much of it is still to be progressed. We are doing the schemes one by one at present.

The Convener: I thank the witnesses for their evidence and for the excellent annual report, which I was pleased to read. It is good for organisations outwith the Parliament to get a flavour of the work that is being done and of the commitment to equalities in the Scottish Parliament.

John Scott: Thank you for your kind reception. I have only recently come to the brief, but I am proud of the work that the Parliament does on equalities. We have done a huge amount of work, which is of great credit to the organisation. I thank the committee for the part that it plays.

The Convener: We will have a short break to allow for the changeover of witnesses.

10:44

Meeting suspended.

10:49

On resuming—

Disability Inquiry

The Convener: The third item on the agenda is our disability inquiry. Today we are considering transport. I am pleased to welcome Sheila Fletcher of the Community Transport Association, Trevor Meadows of the Mobility and Access Committee for Scotland, Trevor Docherty of the Society of Chief Officers of Transportation in Scotland, and Frances Duffy of Transport Scotland. As we did with our first set of witnesses, we will move straight to the many questions that we have for you.

The committee notes that a great deal of guidance and codes of practice are freely available on how to make transport and related services accessible. However, we hear that there are still many problems for disabled people in accessing transport services. What do you suggest we do to speed up progress towards more inclusive transport services?

Trevor Meadows (Mobility and Access Committee for Scotland): I will have a bash at answering that. To be honest, we need to change the thinking. As you said, an awful lot of work has gone on in transport for many years. Much of it began in 1981, which was the international year of the disabled person. There has been an enormous amount of work since then, but it has concentrated on technical aspects to do with physical access and barriers to the existing transport system. The work tends to be about how people get on a bus, for example, and there is a preoccupation with matters such as step heights. The work has not involved people standing back and considering a strategy.

What is needed for disabled people and what barriers to movement are there for them? What is the relevance of the existing transport system? We must think about why people use the transport system. In big city centres, for example, buses are routed for work, education and shopping. However, the majority of disabled people are elderly, so work and education are not relevant for them. They make different kinds of trips—an awful lot of social journeys and fragmentary trips. Walking distances for disabled people are short indeed; 50 per cent of them cannot walk more than about 60yd. What is the relevance of all that for transport? We do not have detailed evidence about the real nature of the problem. When we consider it, time and again we come back to the idea of having more flexible systems. However, even when those are in place, if disabled people have been immobile for a long time, it takes an

awful lot of work with them to give them the confidence to go out and try things again.

We assume wrongly that all we need to do is to provide a technical fix for the existing system. In fact, we need to change how we think about passenger transport. To be succinct, what we need for people is what DHL does for parcels—if you understand what I mean. DHL does not just run 44 tonners on routes; it uses a network on which vehicles of different sizes are allocated on a best-value basis. We need something like that for people. We need a hierarchy of co-ordinated systems.

The funding needs sorting out too. There is a postcode lottery in Britain, and funding becomes available only when people in local authorities or the voluntary sector are pushed to get something done. There is no statutory duty to provide the services that are needed most and there is no evaluation of the benefits. There is a preoccupation with costs, but there is no appreciation or evaluation of the savings to health and social work services of keeping people mobile rather than having them immobile.

In a nutshell, we need an evidence-based strategy and we must realise that that is a huge job.

The Convener: As you will know, we are engaged in an inquiry into the barriers facing disabled people. Whether we consider education, leisure or work, one of the main barriers that disabled people face is transport, because if they cannot get to where they need to go, they are housebound.

Frances Duffy (Transport Scotland): The Executive has just launched its consultation on the national transport strategy. Part of that involves considering questions of accessibility. To inform that, there is research, which is getting a bit more evidence about what exactly the barriers are. That will allow us to take an approach that considers not only physical barriers, such as the technical specifications of a bus or a train, but the nature of the barriers and how we can address the problem in future.

The Convener: What needs to be done to improve accessibility, particularly for rural and island areas? We have been around the country and have heard from people in the islands and certain areas in cities that the transport issue is more acute in such places. Do you have views on what can be done to improve the situation?

Sheila Fletcher (Community Transport Association): I work specifically on the rural community transport initiative, which has been hugely successful throughout rural Scotland. Many of the schemes operate on the islands and in remote rural areas of the Highlands. The really

successful projects are those that consider what the problems are and target the solution at those problems. Demand-responsive transport and flexibly routed services are the ideal solution, as is not always having a big vehicle, but having a small vehicle that can be flexible. Most people want to make short journeys; they do not want to make long journeys. They want to travel to the doctor's surgery, to the hospital or to get some shopping. Having small, local, flexibly routed services is the key to success.

Trevor Docherty (Society of Chief Officers of Transportation in Scotland): Although there is a problem in the rural communities, we should not forget that the issues in the urban environment are just as difficult. In rural communities, we are able to overcome problems for everybody in the community. If there is a transport issue in a rural community, it usually involves the whole community, not just the people who have mobility problems. In urban environments, transport poverty is often worse for people who have mobility problems and is often difficult to detect. In a traditional rural community, everyone has a good knowledge of who is there and who is not; in an urban community, that is not always the case. Although there is a rural dimension to the issues of providing mobility, we should not forget that the issues can be worse in an urban environment, where they are less likely to be identified than in a rural community.

The Convener: Absolutely. Transport is an issue right across the country, from the cities to the islands. The same problems are encountered but in a different way.

Regulations set out minimum requirements for accessible transport provision. Are there any mechanisms in place to encourage and reward those who exceed the minimum requirements and to share good practice?

Trevor Docherty: Statutory requirements are already in place, and local authorities should undertake equality impact assessments of all their policies and functions, including disability services. All the services that local authorities provide should be equality impact assessed to ensure that the services are available to all people, whether they have mobility problems or whatever.

The question whether we can penalise or reward service providers is a difficult one. Where local authorities provide subsidised services, there is no reason why they cannot ensure that, when they put those services out to tender, the tenders are required to meet certain requirements. That would not be hard to do. The problem would arise in relation to commercial, non-tendered services, over which we have no control. Rewarding or penalising the companies that run those services would be difficult for us to do.

The other problem we face is that there is no mechanism for sharing good practice. We find out about good practice through word of mouth, individual contacts and organisations with which we all have contact. Also, one person's good practice might be somebody's poorest practice in another area. There are issues about where we put the goalposts and how we set a quality standard. In Dundee, we are trying to set some sort of quality standard, but we have not got there yet.

The Convener: Do you have facilities or processes to enable you to discuss the quality of the services with the service users? People often say that people do not talk to them about the services that they use.

Trevor Docherty: Yes. In Dundee, we have a mobility and access partnership, which is a forum in which we try to include all the local groups that want to discuss not only issues of transport, but issues of access and mobility. How successful that is depends on the input not only from local authority members, but from local organisations, which we hope will come along and take part in the discussion. There are some good organisations in Dundee that are willing to take part in the debate, but we are still unable to engage with other organisations that should be taking part in the discussion. I do not know how we can formalise the process, but we are attempting to follow it through.

11:00

Trevor Meadows: The codes of practice and legislative requirements relate mainly to technical specifications and the introduction of accessible buses by certain dates. As Trevor Docherty said, the process can be influenced to some extent through tendering of services, but the local authority that I represent controls only about 10 per cent of the network in the area—90 per cent is commercial. That situation is common throughout Scotland. Local government has limited control. In one sense, if we set higher specs, we are penalised, as we need money to fund the higher tender that comes back. The other problem is on the technical side. Even if we insist in the tender that operators use accessible vehicles on routes, those vehicles are not accessible to everyone. There is no such animal as a fully accessible bus, train, aeroplane or ship.

In this area, one learns rapidly about the diversity of the disabled population. It is important to understand not just disabilities, but the barriers to movement that people face and which need to be removed from the system. There is no requirement in place for authorities to run the kind of services that are needed. They are not required to run door-to-door services, but time and again

over 25 years the biggest need that has been identified has been for flexible, non-routed services. Where those exist, they are funded under discretionary powers. At present, because of the cutbacks in local authorities and the need for savings to be made, such services are very vulnerable. With the setting up of Transport Scotland, this is a critical time. The money to fund concessionary travel goes to the agency for the main national scheme, and a growth fund is associated with that. The fund that was left with local authorities for discretionary schemes has been pegged at last year's amount, plus inflation. That is the biggest pressure point. A huge area of growth is people who need to live in their community and do not have expectations, because they have been immobile for many years. Even under the present discretionary powers, there is not the finance for authorities to do what is needed most.

The Convener: Good accessible transport is not just about access for disabled people; it can be about being accessible to people with shopping or people with prams. It should be about providing a service for everyone, rather than saying that we cannot afford to put on a good service for disabled people.

Trevor Meadows: That is right. When we market a service or do research, it is best not to talk about disabled people. We must include them, but the majority of disabled people are over retirement age. About 50 per cent of them are over 75. Those people do not relate to the term "disabled", so if we connect only with groups of disabled people, we miss their input. We must work with elderly forums, Age Concern Scotland and Help the Aged. There are different dimensions to the problem.

Frances Curran (West of Scotland) (SSP): I was interested to hear Trevor Meadows's comment about the need for statutory measures. I have had cause to meet representatives of First bus. You said that your local authority controls 10 per cent of the network, which means that 90 per cent of bus services are commercially run. The First executive in the Glasgow area said that a service was to be taken off because it was not making a profit. When I researched the issue, I was shocked to discover that there are no agreements, requirements, responsibilities or codes of conduct associated with running the service. What leverage do you have over First and the other commercial service providers?

Trevor Meadows: None. We can give advice and produce documents. Some of us have campaigned in various roles for many years. However, there are no statutory requirements or codes of practice that cover that kind of thing.

Frances Curran: Are there not even guidelines?

Trevor Meadows: No. There is a big need for training. MACS has put out guidelines on minimum standards, but their effectiveness is dependent on who reads them and the initiatives that people take in response to them. Groups of disabled people and many users tell us consistently that, even where there is training, it does not carry through to subsequent behaviour. People receive training, but they continue to drive and behave in the same old way—they are not really signed up to it. Training is not always effective because it is not policed and not enforced. It is a huge problem. At present, there are no duties on people.

Frances Duffy: Transport Scotland is responsible for the operation of the rail network in Scotland. We talked earlier about regulation, standards and other ways of trying to move equality forward. Under the franchise, we have a commitment from First ScotRail to make its trains and stations accessible. We monitor that frequently through our service quality inspection regime, which involves going out and checking what it is like in the stations or to get on the trains. The SQUIRE operates in the west of Scotland and is spreading throughout Scotland this year. It gives us key information about how First ScotRail is performing its duty and fulfilling its commitment under the franchise. We regularly report back on that.

We also realise that staff attitudes and training for staff are important in rail transport. MACS has been working with First ScotRail on producing a training package and First ScotRail is investing considerably this year in ensuring that its staff—especially the front-facing staff, such as ticket collectors—are trained. The company is even considering training in sign language for phrases such as, "Which platform do you go to?"

There has been quite a lot of work on rail. I am afraid that I cannot refer to the bus companies, as that is not something for Transport Scotland.

Sheila Fletcher: Last year, Age Concern did a bit of work and found that only a quarter of the bus fleet in Scotland is accessible. The biggest problem with that is that, sometimes, there will be a mixture of accessible and inaccessible buses on the same route, so somebody will have an accessible bus on their outward journey, but not on the way back.

One of the biggest problems in all areas is the accessibility of coaches, which have a longer run-in to becoming fully accessible under the legislation. To date, the coach companies and designers seem to be focusing on lifts, rather than on level entry. They say that only 1 per cent of people in the United Kingdom are wheelchair users and so they ask why they should focus on level entry. However, 10 per cent of the population have a significant mobility problem and 30 per

cent have one to a lesser extent. They will be less likely to want to use a lift because they might feel as though they are being singled out when they get on a coach, but no work is being done on that at the moment. That is a significant area in which we should push for coach access.

Trevor Meadows: Frances Curran talked about the knowledge that people have, and coach access is an interesting area in which to examine that. Often, when people talk about the need to put a lift on a coach, they call it a wheelchair lift, as if wheelchairs went out all by themselves and there was no one sitting in them. It goes back to the basic ignorance of many people. When services have been lift equipped, and there has been proper training and the services have really penetrated the market, two out of every three people who use the lift have been standees—the people who need level access of some kind and cannot get up ramps. Ramps can be barriers to people, but there is a failure to understand such basic points in much of the industry.

Nora Radcliffe: Demand-responsive transport has been mentioned a couple of times. The Scottish Executive's DRT pilot programme was originally scheduled to finish in March this year. Will the witnesses expand on their views on the utility and impact of demand-responsive transport services?

Sheila Fletcher: For the past nine years, I have worked on quite a few demand-responsive transport projects. The pilot has not been my area of interest within the CTA, but I have watched what has happened with it. Such projects have been hugely successful; many of the rural community transport initiative projects have been demand-responsive, flexibly routed services. Such services need quite a lot of marketing to ensure that people know that they exist and do not feel that they are not for them. However, once people start using a demand-responsive service, they will use it more often.

I understand that the funding for the DRT pilot projects has been extended for another two years at the same level as before. It is a little bit sad that it has not been expanded. It is the same with the RCTI; we do not know where the funding will come from for it to continue. We currently have 106 projects, which require about £1.5 million a year. I would say that the initiative has been huge value for money. We have really used it to help people in rural areas.

The big area that has not been considered and that needs to be developed is peri-urban demand-responsive transport. There are four urban projects at the moment—Trevor Docherty will be able to tell you a bit more about the Dundee project, on which he works—but, at the moment, we can only assist communities with fewer than 10,000 people.

Trevor Docherty: As Sheila Fletcher rightly says, I am involved with the Dundee project. When the demand-responsive transport initiative first came up with the urban community transport initiative, it was a very good idea. However, it was a hasty process and we had only a couple of weeks in which to put bids together to seek money.

Although the money is welcome, as it will help us to develop, each of the four schemes—in Glasgow, Aberdeen, Dundee and Edinburgh—is different in what it tries to do. The Edinburgh project develops existing provision, co-ordinates more community transport services and increases the number of services. The Glasgow project has managed to get the operators together and has done well. The Aberdeen project and, to some extent, the Dundee one did not focus on the outcomes that we wanted. We were looking more for outputs than outcomes.

Over the past couple of years of developing the project in Dundee, much of my work has been about changing people's attitudes as opposed to their awareness. In response to a previous question, Trevor Meadows mentioned that people have good awareness of disability issues, but people's attitudes to how we overcome problems of access for people with mobility problems have not changed much.

I have found that the scheme has been successful in getting people to start changing their attitudes to how we consider access to transport for people with mobility problems as well as for people who are socially excluded. People do not recognise that social inclusion involves many facets, not just people with disabilities, but people who are economically inactive or those who have racial or gender problems.

One of the big groups of people that we have identified as having problems travelling on public transport is young males aged between 18 and 25. We have identified some of the problems, but we will need a lot of money to overcome them. My bid for Dundee was for £0.5 million over the next couple of years. We will not be able even to approach developing services with £100,000. We need to focus the money more effectively and to draw down more money to make progress with the projects.

Trevor Meadows: We need to work out where DRT fits in. People with mobility problems do not need access to a bus because they tell us, "I can't get on the bus." We do not want to be led down the wrong avenue. People want access to a range of activities and facilities.

Over the years, people in transport professions began to see transport as an end in itself rather than a means to an end and they lost the deep

knowledge of the market. When one understands where people are, where they need to get to, that they cannot use their legs any more and that they cannot afford to run a car, it is obvious that they need a service that gets them from or through their door to a destination. They need to get to bingo, to the shops or to their friend's house for the afternoon to have a cup of tea—people need access to the whole range of human activities. Only DRT can provide that.

People have tried to go against DRT because they think that routed systems are cheaper. That is true, but they are not substitutable—it is a false economic argument. In economics, one can only compare direct substitutes and one cannot substitute routed services for flexible services.

Much work in the UK in the 1970s experimented with DRT, but it was not economical because it could never cover the costs from the fares box. In unit-cost terms, it is more expensive than a routed service and the subsidies could not be justified until 1981 when DRT was provided specifically for people with disabilities. There has still been no evaluation of the costs and benefits of that except in Oslo.

11:15

In Oslo, the DRT system is made up of a mixture of minibuses and taxis. It has been found that, without it, 15 per cent of the people who use it would have had to be institutionalised, because they would not have been able to go on living independently. The cost of institutionalising that 15 per cent more than covers the cost of the whole service.

By the mid 1980s, Sweden had spent 44 million Swedish krona on DRT in Stockholm alone. In the States, a different route was taken, largely because of the lead that angry Vietnam veterans gave. They sat in their wheelchairs with their carbines and said, "If you can get on that bus, I should be able to as well." Although a great deal of money was spent on making the mainstream system accessible, the vets and other people realised that they still could not get where they wanted to go. At the back-end of last year, we heard that an initial sum of \$75 million would be put into DRT systems in New York. The pendulum has swung the other way.

As Trevor Docherty mentioned, the outcomes must be examined. We need to ask who is travelling and why they are travelling and, if people are not travelling, why that is the case. That information must be disaggregated. The industry does not carry out such work. The big revenue budget in Scotland that affects older and disabled people is the concessionary travel budget, on which £159 million will be spent next year. The

number of trips that are made is all that is measured. Four per cent of people who are under retirement age are disabled. We know nothing about how people who are between the ages of 60 and 100 use concessionary travel; we do not know how often they use it, what they use it for or how far they go. No information is available. That approach could not be sold to Tesco or to any other company that is good at marketing. We must know much more about those people and develop a system that serves their needs. DRT is a key part of that system.

Nora Radcliffe: My next question was going to be about the concessionary bus travel scheme. How useful do you think it is? Trevor Meadows has probably given his answer, but other witnesses might have something to say.

Sheila Fletcher: The biggest problem is that the scheme is for registered bus services only. Users of services that are not registered—which are among the most flexibly routed services and which include most of the community transport projects—cannot access concessionary fares. That is a major problem.

Trevor Meadows: There is a councillor on the Local Government and Transport Committee whom I know from wearing another hat. He comes from a rural area and he was saying, "Great. I can't ride on the pass because there isn't a bus in my area." Sheila Fletcher has mentioned the main network. In rural areas, the target is to have a bus service that is accessible within a distance of 1,000m, but that is in the context of walking distances. Fifty per cent of disabled people cannot walk more than 60m, and that distance should be halved, because if they miss the bus, they want to be able to get back home again. We should think about the psychology of the situation as well.

In urban areas, the target distance is 400m, but that does not take account of where services go once people get on them. Someone might want to visit a friend a few terraces away, but the bus is routed into the town centre. We must examine the relevance of the system. We do not have sufficient information to enable us to assess the role of local, routed bus services or the rail service. How much of the answer can such services provide? We need to evaluate what proportion of the answer could be provided by a multimodal DRT system, which will be horrendously complex from the point of view of cost-effectiveness and logistics, and to consider the consequences of not establishing such a system. Would that mean that some people would not have equality and mobility?

We must gather the evidence to allow us to find out what we mean when we promise social inclusion. Research that the Executive has sponsored on improving public transport for

disabled people, the results of which will come out next month, will show conclusively that the gap is widening and that the new initiative under which people can travel long distance for free is not affecting the rump of the problem, which is that some people are still prisoners in their homes and cannot get around their local communities.

It is not necessary to look abroad for big DRT systems; there are some in the UK. In the west midlands, for example, there is a system that allows 2 million disabled people a year to travel locally. However, user figures show that not enough bravery has been shown. The whole market has not been penetrated; it is certainly not the case that 20 per cent of the population has been registered, and the people who have been registered are probably getting only about two trips a month. What is equality? The national travel survey shows that mobile people can make between 15 and 20 trips a week. Should that not be an aspiration for everyone in society? We must level up the average. To do that, different systems must be eligible. It is not good enough just to give people a pass without considering the outcomes.

Trevor Docherty: Trevor Meadows is quite right. As has been said, concessionary fares benefit only people who can access mainstream bus services. There is no money for us to increase access to transport for people who have mobility problems. The taxi card schemes that local authorities operate are non-statutory and we must find the money for them from our budgets.

Another issue is that, where people are entitled to a bus pass under the national concessionary scheme, some local authorities are refusing them access to the local non-statutory schemes such as the taxi card schemes. When the national concessionary scheme was introduced, Tavish Scott, the Minister for Transport and Telecommunications, made it clear that anyone who was entitled to a bus pass should not be discriminated against by being refused access to non-statutory schemes. Nevertheless, I understand that that is happening in some local authority areas. That needs to be rectified.

As Trevor Meadows says, the concessionary fares scheme will not mobilise the people who are not mobile at the moment. Although we should welcome the concessionary travel scheme for elderly people and those with mobility problems who are able to access it, we must recognise that a significant number of people are being discriminated against because they have a mobility problem.

Trevor Meadows: The statistics from the survey of existing users show that almost 70 per cent of the trips that are made by pass holders on the main system are for shopping. That is atypical, as shopping usually accounts for only about 20 per

cent of people's patterns of movement. That shows the limited relevance of the available routes in giving people equal access to a range of activities.

Ms White: I was going to ask about the research that was commissioned by the Executive, which highlights what you say about it being not enough to make only certain modes of transport accessible. You have given me loads of answers to that question, but could you be more specific? You have mentioned taxi schemes. Are you talking about dial-a-bus schemes and that type of thing? Are you saying that not enough money is being allocated to local authorities to provide those services? You say that, even if the concessionary transport scheme was perfect for disabled people that would not be enough, as it is not enough to enable someone to make a journey on a bus: there are other issues to be addressed, such as affordability. Can you give us some ideas about how that could be addressed—for example, through the taxi card and dial-a-bus schemes?

Trevor Meadows: The best analogy that I can give you is that of DHL, which has a centre for people to phone and a range of vehicles. It has semi-fixed routes and door-to-door services on minibuses in urban areas. The semi-fixed routes might go through rural areas, focusing on towns and getting people between communities.

As well as that, taxis are needed as part of the system so that, if just one person requested a trip within a town, a taxi could be sent rather than a bus. Buses could be used where there was going to be multiple occupancy. In rural areas, there are sometimes no taxis, so car schemes need to be developed and made available. If someone wanted to make a trip within a village, that would not require a minibus to be sent out; there would have to be a more local scheme. It would be a matter of trying to be responsible and controlling the costs.

The fact that such schemes are complicated to deliver is underestimated by industry and the professions. They have seen the voluntary sector provide such schemes in the past, and they have marginalised them as a small issue involving little buses and disabled people. It is a huge issue, and the scale of the problem is reinforced in the findings of the research that the Executive commissioned. I have a pre-publication copy of the report, in which the first recommendation is that

"A coherent and comprehensive strategy for achieving equality of mobility must be an integral part of a national, regional and local transport strategy rather than being a separate add-on."

The sheer scale of the problem needs to be recognised. We are talking about 22 per cent of the Scottish population who do not have the option

of walking, driving a car—or even getting a bus in some areas. It is a huge undertaking to provide for them and, at present, that is being done on an ad hoc basis. That provision is also vulnerable, as the funding is not in place.

Taxi card schemes are great in the short term, but in the long term they need to be part of a DRT system. The problem with taxi card schemes is that they maximise expenditure, as there is no opportunity for ride sharing. In Stockholm, it was found that half a dozen people would go roughly from A to B, at the same time but using six taxis, whereas negotiation through a scheduling centre could have got all those people to ride share. The issue is how the system is assembled. That cannot be done overnight. The problem with DRT is that people think that it will solve all their problems on day 1, whereas such systems are like children—they grow up and gain capability the bigger and more sophisticated they get. Another problem is getting funding for DRT. We have funding for national travel, but secure funding is not in place for local travel, which means that the nuts and bolts of travel—the living trips—are still based on a postcode lottery.

Sheila Fletcher: I am a little concerned about giving money to local authorities, because there are good and bad authorities. In my experience, unless funding is ring fenced for specific measures, it can be sidelined into some other priority of the local authority. I am hugely concerned about the consultation meetings on the regional transport strategies, because equal opportunities issues have not come up in any of the meetings that I have attended. Equal opportunities projects should be written into the regional transport strategies. At present, there is not a lot of talk about that. Local authorities seem to think of the strategy as a means of getting a lot of money from the Government for road improvements and all the other things that they have done in the past through their strategies. The councils do not really consider the big issues of mobility and equal opportunities and I am not sure how we can get them to engage in that. Many of the people I work with go along to meetings to raise issues, but we cannot be sure that they will be written into the regional transport strategies when they are finalised.

The Convener: The issues have been recorded here, though.

Ms White: Sheila Fletcher mentioned that people have been involved in the consultation. Is the consultation with disabled people sufficient on issues such as accessibility? What you said is entirely different from other evidence that we have heard. Are disabled people involved enough?

Sheila Fletcher: There has not been enough involvement. I know that it is early days, because

the strategies do not have to be finished until March next year, but one or two of the meetings that I have attended have been closed and by invitation only. People who use services, let alone people who have mobility problems, are not invited. We should remember that people who have mobility problems have extra difficulties getting to consultation meetings. They need specific transport to get to a meeting to make their views known. We need the issues to be addressed in all the regional transport strategies throughout Scotland.

Trevor Docherty: Sheila Fletcher and Sandra White are right. Some mobility organisations and people with disabilities take part in the consultation process, but we must acknowledge that we have not identified or accessed an awful lot of people whom we need to access to find out their needs and requirements. As Trevor Meadows and I have discussed in the past, it is no use somebody saying, "There's £10 million; go and solve the problem," because the reality is that we do not know what the market is. One of the fears about transport projects for people with mobility problems is that once we start delivering them, we will discover that, all of a sudden, the target market is not 15 per cent of the population, but 30 per cent. That means that the system cannot meet the demand, which creates an environment in which people who have mobility problems feel even more isolated because they cannot access services. As well as finding out about people's needs and requirements, organisations need to find out who the people are who have the needs and what numbers are involved.

Trevor Meadows: Many people in the profession who have scant knowledge of disability issues carry out almost tokenistic consultation with disabled people. I am sorry to have to say that, but people think that they can go to a dozen disabled people in their area or to one group of disabled people to get the complete picture. They cannot. They have to work a lot harder at it than that; they have to understand the barriers that prevent people articulating their views. However, as I said, we cannot think that all the academics and highly paid and long-serving professionals have missed the issues and that an 85-year-old lady with arthritis, cataracts, late-diagnosed diabetes and a heart problem will suddenly tell us how to rejig the whole system. She will tell you about her day-to-day problems and frustrations.

11:30

Many years ago, social workers in Strathclyde told me that one of the things that they have to do with people who become disabled or immobile is get them to come to terms with their limitations. They tell them to forget about going out, going to

the bingo and going to see their pals because that will just make them climb the walls with frustration. They depress expectations and get people to live with what is called a minimum-space concept, which gets them off tranquillisers and anti-depressants. I remember that one person who was asked, "Have you any unmet transport needs?" said, "Nay, lad. I don't go out any more." They are not going to say, "I want there to be a bus that I can book on the day before I want it and, when it arrives, I want a chap to knock on my door and not just poop his horn at the kerb. I want him to lend me his arm and help me to the bus, which I want to be configured so it is safe so that I won't be thrown to the floor when it starts off." They will not ask for that because they are stoic and because they have no idea that passenger transport can be like that. A lot of the conventional consultation that is undertaken has to be put in a wider context.

The issue is, again, to do with economics. People might say that they want a lot more to be spent on taxi card schemes or rail accessibility. However, you need to decide what part those elements will play in the final solution and how delivery should be configured if all those elements have to be subsidised.

Frances Duffy: The national transport strategy, which should be published later this year, will set some of the key outcomes that we would expect the regional transport strategies to pick up.

I take Trevor Meadows's point about the need to understand people's access needs. Transport Scotland has specific appraisal guidance for projects. We are taking the lead in how transport projects should be considered. The guidance makes it clear that people should consider not only the economic impact. There are five main objectives that each transport project should be measured against. Accessibility is a key part of that. We do work in that regard with the regional transport strategies and try to provide guidance to the local authorities to ensure that they are aware of how one can use the system. That allows the wider benefits of carrying out various transport projects to be brought into the debate and means that the focus is not solely on the primary cost-benefit analysis, which might not always be appropriate.

The key thing to do is to set out at the beginning of the process the main objective that you are trying to achieve. We ought to see that process improving with the work that is done on our national and regional transport strategies. That should ensure that we get a clear and shared view of the objectives and work through the process that will help us to come up with projects that will deliver those objectives.

Trevor Meadows: Objectives are key. That has been exposed as a lack in the national

concessionary travel scheme. What is it trying to achieve? Monitoring is always in line with your objectives—if your objectives are woolly, your monitoring will be woolly. We need to change that. What is being done in that regard is heartening.

In relation to the regional and national transport strategies, I hear a lot about accessibility mapping. We deliberately include the phrase "mobility and access" in the title of our committee because we want people to understand the difference between the two things. Often, the measurement of accessibility is simply a mapping exercise that says that people are within a certain distance of a facility—for example, a certain percentage of the population is within a certain number of metres of a shopping centre, leisure centre or so on. However, that does not mean that those people use those facilities. We need to look beyond the accessibility figures and determine whether people have the mobility that would enable them to access the facilities. Equality of opportunity is measured simply in terms of physical access. We have to understand the other barriers that we have been referring to—the psychological barriers, the lack of confidence, the lack of support, the lack of an incentive to build up muscle tone and go out into a dangerous environment and so on.

A classic example is how priority for winter gritting is always given to vehicle movements, not pedestrian movements, yet old people become prisoners as soon as there is ice on the pavement because they are terrified of falling. Engineers sometimes do not understand that ice on the pavement can mean death. More than 30 per cent of people who break a femur are dead within nine months. Those who fall tell others about it and the fear builds up in that population. Some simple things could be addressed, such as intervention levels on pavements. Pavements are not fixed until there is a centimetre's difference in height between slabs. The fact that that can kill some of the people we are talking about is not understood. There is a big difference between accessibility mapping and whether people end up with affected mobility.

The Convener: I remind colleagues to keep the questions as short as possible and the witnesses to keep their answers as short as possible. We have loads more questions to ask and I am concerned that we will overrun considerably.

Ms White: My question is about the various deadlines for vehicle accessibility. Many people have told us that 2020 is far too long to wait. There are various other deadlines but there does not seem to be any joined-up thinking. We will be left with gaps between vehicles being ready. What are your views on that? What can we do to fill those gaps? You have answered most of that already.

Trevor Docherty: Part V of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, which has recently become law, ensures that access to services is provided. We do not necessarily need low-floor buses to do that. As Trevor Meadows said, we tend to focus on vehicles and not services. It is about making services accessible, part of which is about ensuring that suitable transport is in place. One of the interesting emerging issues concerns accessible taxis. The Disabled Persons Transport Advisory Committee has been doing a lot of work on the technical aspects of access to buses, planes, trains and automobiles. You name it, DPTAC has done a lot of work on it, but one area that it has tended to shy away from is taxis. Some manufacturers put too much emphasis on the hackney cab—the side-entrance taxi. People who are involved in transport recognise that it is hardly inclusive to have someone in a wheelchair facing backwards in a taxi, because when the driver asks where they are going the person has to try to turn round to see where they are. DPTAC is trying to make those types of vehicle more accessible.

We need to ensure that there is a mix of vehicles out there that is able to provide the service. Although technical and engineering access is important, what would speed up the process is to focus on ensuring that the services are accessible and that there are suitable transport options for people to use those services. That is how we can perhaps circumnavigate the problem about whether it should be 2014 or 2020 or whether a vehicle should be accessible. As has been said, even if a vehicle is accessible at the moment, it is not required to be, and the vehicle you go out in might not be the one that you return in. There are issues about confidence and access to services; I think that we should focus on access to services.

Marlyn Glen: Without trying to depress expectations any further, the committee is hearing loud and clear what you are saying. I have some specific questions on what we have at the moment, even though it is limited. Our evidence, and research commissioned by the Executive, has highlighted that the attitudes of transport staff can cause additional problems for disabled people and can impact on their confidence to travel. In your view, what should be done to improve staff attitudes towards disabled people? You mentioned training.

Trevor Docherty: You are right. We have been quite successful in getting across not only to transport operators but in all services, such as people working in shops, the importance of being aware of what disability is and of all the issues surrounding disability, so that everyone understands what a wheelchair is and what a ramp is for and so on. However, what we are not as successful at is changing people's attitudes.

One of my big bugbears relates to something I am trying to do in Dundee, which is to raise the quality standard of people who provide transport services. However, to do that I will not focus on disability awareness. All the bus drivers who work for the two local bus companies in Dundee are trained in disability awareness, but that does not help when the bus turns up at the kerb and the driver says, "Oh, I don't know how to work the ramp." That is the reality of what happens out there, just as there are taxi drivers who drive past somebody who happens to be in a wheelchair. Everyone here knows that those things happen, so we need to change people's attitudes to disability and get them to understand that the needs of people with mobility problems are the same as anybody else's needs. Our attitudes have to change if we are to be able to deal with that, so I think that we need to focus more on people's attitudes than on awareness. Although awareness and technical skills are important, we will not improve services if we do not change attitudes.

Marlyn Glen: Do you have suggestions for how to do that?

Trevor Docherty: At the moment, all taxi drivers in Dundee have to go through disability awareness training in order to obtain a licence. That training is provided by a local disability organisation and is effective because it does experiential stuff. I do not know how good or how bad that is. For some people, throwing them in the back of a minibus and driving them round a corner at 60mph while they are strapped in a wheelchair can be quite effective in slowing drivers down, as Trevor Meadows knows. However, I am not so sure how successful such training is when it comes to encouraging transport providers to encourage disabled people to use their transport services. I am trying to work with that local organisation to see whether we can develop some sort of attitude training along with the disability awareness training. It is difficult. Although we are quite successful at ensuring that everyone goes through the training in order to tick the boxes, we are not as good at quality control and assessing how effective the training is; that is where the work needs to be done. We must be able to ensure that training is effective and leads to improved services for people with mobility problems.

Marlyn Glen: I refer you to the *Official Report* of last week's committee meeting, at which we considered that issue in some detail and had a good discussion about how training could be made more effective.

The Scottish Executive's research in 2004 identified that fewer than half of all local authorities operated a taxi concession scheme, and it characterised the situation as one of inconsistency and some disenchantment, particularly as there

are many areas of Scotland where the taxi may be the only form of public transport that is viable. Are you aware of any improvement in the situation over the past two years? No? Okay.

Sheila Fletcher: One of the big problems in rural areas is that there may not be a taxi, only a private hire car. I know from my experience with Highland Council that local authorities are frightened of trying to implement legislation requiring wheelchair-accessible vehicles, because they think that the hackney-type vehicles will change over to private hire, over which they will have no control and which will not be accessible. They are hugely concerned about that and are trying to find ways of dealing with it. Many rural local authorities do not have a taxi card scheme. Aberdeenshire Council is probably the biggest rural area that has one, and Dumfries and Galloway Council has one, but I cannot think of any other rural areas that have a taxi card scheme, probably because there are not huge numbers of taxis out there to get involved in such a scheme.

Marlyn Glen: We talked about that last week, when it was suggested that half the local authorities had such a scheme. It would be good to have an annex in our report listing those that do.

You talked about new developments in technology. Are there any other challenges that you would like to draw to our attention? One example is making transport services accessible to larger, motorised wheelchairs.

Trevor Meadows: Access is a problem that the industry has talked to MACS about. It is complicated. There is a range of people who need transport, all with different needs. I know of someone who could not sit and needed to stand, because of a frozen spine, and there are people who have to use travelling beds. There are others with prone-position wheelchairs with oxygen cylinders, and there has been a huge increase in the market for scooters. Some of us have been battling away for years saying, "Stop talking about making things wheelchair accessible." That is one of the things that the industry has in its head, rather than understanding the needs of a range of people. It can actually be a lot harder for some people to board a vehicle if they are not in a wheelchair. If people who are picked up in a door-to-door service are in a wheelchair, the chairs can be out and up in no time. It is frail people who insist on walking with a zimmer frame who are the most immobile. It is amazing how a wheelchair increases people's mobility.

11:45

It is a big challenge to describe how accessible a service is and errors have been made. For

example, operators have described services as accessible or fully accessible, but that has not been the case for a person doing a long-distance journey. I accept that such journeys are not done every day, but when they occur they can be dangerous because a person is a long way from home and cannot easily get back. There are cases when people have gone on long-distance routes on which they need to interchange and use two services, and they have got halfway down the route and found that they could not get on the second service because there were different door widths to get through and so on.

Operators have different policies; for example, some will not carry people with light scooters. Taxi operators will not take people with light scooters because they say that the scooters damage the carpets. However, more disabled people will use light scooters and that trend must be recognised. Matters like that must be taken on board and we must work out the mix of vehicles that can be allocated. A big technical challenge is to describe levels of access adequately; doing that will help raise awareness and change attitudes. It seems that in many engineers' minds, accessibility has been reduced to how we get a frame on wheels into a box on wheels—it is not about people at all. Understanding all the different mobility problems that there are for accessing a vehicle could help with some of the awareness changing. The other technical challenge is how on earth we bring all this together. How do we build a DRT system? It involves systems engineering rather than mechanical engineering and it is difficult to do. A project involving a transport working group is coming to Scotland through the efficient government project, which will initially consider putting together non-emergency ambulance transport and social work transport, which are examples of DRT systems.

Why do we have different systems? In my local authority area, there are about eight different types of DRT system, including social work and non-emergency ambulance transport. There is no co-ordination and they have separate control centres and different eligibility criteria. It will be a huge task to bring together different systems and bridge the cultures of social work departments, transportation services, education departments with special needs education and ambulance authorities so that there is one sensible system that makes the most of the money in the pot.

Trevor Docherty: Members should be aware that DPTAC sets technical specifications. All its specifications for transporting people in wheelchairs are based on a standard wheelchair. I think that there are between 4,500 and 5,000 different types of wheelchair, so the question is what a standard wheelchair is. As Trevor Meadows rightly said, that issue must be

addressed. He has been involved in this area a lot longer than I have—as you can see by his grey hair—and he will tell you that there is nobody we cannot transport. If we have the right type of vehicle and restraint, we can transport anybody. There is no barrier; it is just about ensuring that we have a mix of vehicles out there to do the transporting.

Frances Duffy: I would like to provide an update on rail issues in respect of the points that you raised. First ScotRail has done tests on the use of light scooters. They are suitable for use on all train units, but there are issues around booking in advance and longer journeys. One of the matters that we are considering is support at stations. There are about 340 rail stations in Scotland, but few of them are completely accessible for people to move from one part of the station to another. We must consider the longer-term improvement of stations. However, there is a service whereby if someone is going to an unmanned station, they can book in advance to ensure that they get support to help them move from one part of the station to another or to another form of transport.

That service must be booked 24 hours in advance, so I recognise that it is obviously not the most accessible way of arranging things. The service is primarily to support people making longer journeys on the rail system rather than short commuter journeys. We are assessing the service and have consulted our colleagues in the Department for Transport on how we can improve the service by, for example, using text messaging or e-mail to confirm someone's booking. That is an on-going consultation and we expect an update and guidance later this year.

Marlyn Glen: I want to ask about timetabling and information. We have heard evidence that timetabling can have a particular impact on disabled people—reduced services after 6 pm, for example, can have a particular impact on them—and we have repeatedly been told about the difficulties that people experience when they try to find information in a suitable format. What needs to be done to improve timetabling and the provision of information?

Trevor Meadows: All those issues are embedded in the concept of developing a demand-responsive system. Currently, timetables are greatly under the control of the commercial operators, which must do what they think is commercially viable. People who have come to meetings that I have held have been frustrated and have berated operators, but operators will say, "If a service doesn't make a 23 per cent profit, that's it. We won't run it. That's not my responsibility."

It is a long time since 1985, when deregulation was introduced, but many people still think that all

bus services are regulated. If an operator does not see a profit, it will not run the service. A service will be taken off at weekends or after 6 o'clock in the evening, for example, because there is no market for it and the operator will not make a profit from it and will not cross-subsidise it.

The only solution is to introduce services that are funded by the public purse, which takes us back to how to run such services efficiently. I know of subsidised services in rural areas for which the unit cost has been more than £60 per trip. I am not talking about DRT—I am talking about routed, big bus, Stagecoach-type services. DRT is not always the most expensive way of solving the problem, but it lets people say when they want to travel. Is it radical and strange to respond to, rather than determine, demand?

The problem is that people think that providing information simply involves making leaflets available. There have been crass examples of such thinking: I remember a bus operator's leaflets being available only in the bus station. The issue is how to contact people and how to get them out. Many specialist skills to do with print sizes and reading ages are involved. Many things are not easy to understand and a lot of information can be crammed in. People must use the minimum number of words and think about what they are trying to get someone to do. If a person—a stranger—is trying to give someone the confidence to phone them for the first time, things should be kept very simple. Many older disabled people do not like making such calls. Having big blocks of white paper around print is okay—information does not need to be packed out. The issue is how to get information to people.

Even when simplicity is achieved, people will need someone they trust to sit down and explain things to them. They will be much more receptive to information from those they know, such as social workers, care workers and people from elderly forums, who will sit down with them, than they will be when a stranger gives them information.

People can have a psychological blackout when they receive information from someone unfamiliar. Someone may say, "It's very easy. You phone this number, tell them who you are, that you want to go from A to B tomorrow and the time when you want to travel. Have you got that?" The person will nod their head and say, "Yeah." Two minutes later, they will say, "So what do I do?" The process takes time.

People who are virtually housebound or who go out only to a social work day centre are not used to radical changes in their concepts about what they can do and where they can go. Marketing should therefore be very sensitive—it should not

be the same for such a market. Specialist techniques are required.

Trevor Docherty: There are two issues. Marlyn Glen mentioned reduced services after 6 o'clock. Let us be clear: everybody will be affected by reduced services, not only people with mobility problems.

In Dundee, we have taken the view that real-time information should be used to improve people's access to information because a paper timetable will be no good if a bus is not running. Real-time information can assist in the process, but we must ensure that people can access real-time information in formats that are available to them. We have made information available on the internet and we will shortly make it available on mobile phones. Such an approach might help younger people and many elderly people who surf the net. We are attempting to ensure that information is live, as doing so will address some safety issues: a person will not stand waiting at a bus stop for 20 minutes if they know that a bus is due at 6 o'clock but will not come until 20 past 6.

As Trevor Meadows said, we have to ensure that the information is relevant and accessible to the people who require it. Technology has to be used to address that. Having information on the internet and at bus stops and sending it to mobile phones is fine, but we have to ensure that people can access it and thereby benefit from the technology, which, in the main, is not that expensive to produce.

Trevor Meadows: There are services for people with severe hearing problems who use BSL that can be booked by text, but I have had meetings with people in Kirkcaldy who were confused by the texts that they were getting because the people who texted them back did not realise that their first language is BSL, not English. An understanding of such issues has to be embedded in the information system and in everything we do.

Frances Duffy: I want to raise two issues. One relates to the frequency of services, which is not just an issue for disabled people. In the franchise agreement with First ScotRail, we set out a service-level commitment on the frequency of services. We will work continually with First ScotRail to see whether there are opportunities for improving the frequency of any service. However, as Trevor Meadows said, the business case for additional services has to be made. At the beginning of each new franchise, we set out what services we are looking for.

Secondly, Transport Scotland has just taken over sponsorship of Traveline Scotland, which is tasked with trying to ensure that we have up-to-date, accurate information about all travel services within Scotland and from Scotland to major points

in the rest of the UK. That has developed around call-centre and internet technology. It will be exciting to see what we can do with mobile phones and personal texting, which we want to develop the use of. Traveline Scotland is about to review its policy and operations, so we will see further developments later this year.

Nora Radcliffe: Will the real-time systems that you are setting up in Dundee be integrated with Traveline, so that it gets access to real-time information to feed back to the customer?

Trevor Docherty: The website dundeetravelinfo.com features a link to travelinescotland.com. I do not know how we are going to integrate the real-time system with travelinescotland.com. I am not involved in that, but Fran Duffy might know more about it. There are real-time information systems in parts of Glasgow and Edinburgh. I suggest that the ideal thing would be to link the systems.

Real-time information is more for immediate demand. If someone is travelling from Glasgow to Dundee, their main concern is to find out what time the buses are, as opposed to knowing that the bus is five minutes late when they are in Glasgow waiting to get to Dundee. The issue is what sort of information somebody requires and at what point they require it. There is a need to ensure that all types of information are linked. The only thing we need to watch is that there is not information overload, and that people get only the information they require.

Frances Duffy: We are talking about the information necessary to plan journeys rather than about someone standing at a bus stop wondering whether a bus will come along in the next five minutes, but I take your point about integration. I do not know the answer to your question and I will look into the matter.

The Convener: We had a number of questions for each organisation, but we are really short of time, so we intend to write to you to seek further clarification. Unless there is anything that you have not told us that you think we need to know, I thank you for your evidence, which was interesting. I will suspend the meeting to allow for a changeover of witnesses.

11:59

Meeting suspended.

12:04

On resuming—

The Convener: I am pleased to give a warm welcome to Stanley Flett from the Aberdeen Accessible Transport Group, Andy Aitken from the Annandale Transport Initiative, Niall Smith from Caithness Rural Transport, Jan Goodall from the Dundee Accessible Transport Action Group, and John Chick from Teviot Wheels. I am sorry that you had to wait so long, but we had lots of good information and, once we start to hear good answers, we want to ask more and more questions.

We have a lot to get through, so I will start the questions. How are individual initiatives typically funded? What, if any, difficulties does the availability of funding regimes present?

Jan Goodall (Dundee Accessible Transport Action Group): I do not know how projects are typically funded; I can speak only about Dundee. We have community regeneration funding to run a friendly bus shopping scheme for people in sheltered housing. That funding is short term, which is always a problem.

Andy Aitken (Annandale Transport Initiative): We are funded by the RCTI to about 60 per cent of our requirement. The process is simple in that we rely on one funder, so the paperwork is not onerous, but we are vulnerable because if the political climate and funding regime changed we would have to look for totally new funding.

Niall Smith (Caithness Rural Transport): In Caithness, we have a dial-a-ride scheme with two buses, two paid drivers and a co-ordinator. The scheme, which has been in place for six or seven years, has been funded throughout by the rural transport initiative to about 60 per cent. About 15 per cent of our income comes from the local enterprise company, about 15 per cent comes from fares and about 8 per cent is from the local council.

John Chick (Teviot Wheels): We receive a grant from the Scottish Executive, but the majority of our funding comes from Scottish Borders Council's social car scheme.

Stanley Flett (Aberdeen Accessible Transport Group): In Aberdeen, we have a dial-a-ride bus scheme. The moneys come from the Scottish Executive but are administered by Aberdeen City Council. The bus is run by Stagecoach Bluebird. We have a bit of difficulty with that, which I will go into later.

The Convener: Does the funding application process present a burden for your organisations and, if so, what could be done to improve the situation?

Andy Aitken: It presents a burden to an extent, although I am sure that the matter depends on the structure of each organisation. The bulk of our funding work is done by our three paid members of staff, although our volunteer staff, especially the directors, have a great deal of input. It is always at the back of our minds that we must look to future funding to sustain the service. There is always a worry that the funding could disappear at any time for one reason or another. The funding process is a burden to the extent that it takes up thinking time that could otherwise be devoted to providing services.

Niall Smith: Most of our fundraising has been done through the rural transport initiative. Every two or three years, there is a big push to get the money in. The biggest difficulty is with getting capital for new vehicles, which needs a lot more effort and causes more difficulty. In the past, we have applied for capital support from the rural transport initiative for a new vehicle and been told to wait another year, which left us with major problems with the existing vehicle.

John Chick: On funding, we do not know what is wanted from us. There is a call for community bus schemes that are run by accessible transport organisations such as ours. I am the only person in Teviot Wheels who is paid—everybody else works voluntarily. We keep hearing rumours that funding will die unless we start running a minibus to allow rural communities to go shopping, but we are governed by the rules of our local council and we cannot carry those people.

Jan Goodall: Dundee Accessible Transport Action Group has tried to get a local dial-a-ride scheme off the ground. We have done a lot of work on that and have employed consultants to develop a feasible project; however, the lottery has turned us down twice. That reflects a general lack of understanding that transport is a means to an end and that it is transport that allows people to do things. That does not seem to be generally appreciated.

The Convener: Is the current provision of dial-a-ride services sufficient to meet the needs of disabled people in your communities? If not, what more needs to be done?

Jan Goodall: We do not have any dial-a-ride scheme in Dundee. I know of only two in Scotland—Handicabs and Dial-a-Journey—that are truly demand responsive.

Disabled people need to do what other people are able to do. That means a whole range of activities, not just shopping. The lack of transport for visits to primary care is one of my personal hobby-horses. Traditionally, transport has been available to take people to hospital and to hospital clinics, but not to primary care. However, health

services are now being pushed out of hospital into primary care, and some people may need to spend money on taxis to get to health appointments of all sorts, whether for chiropody, physiotherapy, or whatever. That makes a big hole in somebody's budget if they are on a benefit income.

Stanley Flett: One of the most important words in all the demand-responsive transport schemes is independence. Independence is important to us all. People with disabilities have equal rights to move around and, as has been said, visit somebody even two streets away—something that they may not have done for many years. In my humble opinion, demand-responsive transport creates independence.

In Aberdeen, the transport scheme is being relaunched, but a lot of unhappiness has been caused because we are now told that we have funding for "another half a bus". I am not sure which half of the bus we are going to get. I do not have a copy of that letter in front of me—some of you may not realise, but I am a registered blind person and I do not read. So, we have funding for "another half a bus". I am not sure whether we are getting the driver or the other half of the bus, but that is unsatisfactory.

A glossy leaflet was produced for the relaunch, which had a map on the back of it that illustrated where the bus would be on a specific day. Then, the scheme was thrown city-wide without anybody being told. The whole situation has been rather sad. When the scheme was first launched, there was a great deal of happiness among many people with disability who felt that, at last, we had something. Sadly, the scheme is not working properly. The last thing on earth that we want, though, is the scheme to be taken away, as that would be a disaster.

Andy Aitken: We do not run any demand-responsive transport, but there is a dial-a-ride scheme in Dumfries and Galloway. It appears that, in many cases, the demand part of it is only the pick-up; where the person goes is not demand responsive, but is dictated by where the bus is going. It is not, therefore, truly demand responsive in the sense of taking somebody from where they are to where they want to go. That is another issue that needs to be addressed.

12:15

Niall Smith: Our service is completely demand responsive, but it is very limited; we can pay the drivers only from 9 am to 5 pm. We have two vehicles—one is based in Thurso and one in Wick. In the main, the journeys that we undertake involve taking people into those two centres to access services of a variety of sorts. Outwith the

hours of 9 am to 5 pm, we rely on a pool of volunteers. Given that they are not reliably available, we may, or we may not, be able to provide a service. Also, if a vehicle has a problem with maintenance or repair and is off the road, there is no service. Some disabled people have their own modified transport and drivers, but for anyone else we are probably the only service in our area.

Through the initiative at the edge, we heard that people in south-east Caithness want transport to get them from their local area into a local centre such as Dunbeath, where they can access services. We are currently piloting such a service using an old modified vehicle and six volunteer drivers who have just been minibus driver awareness scheme—MIDAS—trained. We are running the pilot with money from the local enterprise company, the local council and the initiative at the edge. We will see whether the demand justifies doing more to ensure that a sustainable service of that sort is made available to people in the area and whether the type of service that we are trying to offer works. At the moment, there is no support for people in the rural parts of Caithness who want to make short journeys.

John Chick: What we really need is some sort of equal footing around the country. Jan Goodall has just said that people in her area do not get funding to travel to primary health care appointments. Our situation is exactly the opposite: Teviot Wheels can take someone to a chiropody or physiotherapy clinic and get social car scheme funding and yet we cannot take someone to see their hospital consultant. I know that personally, as I had to use the service up until about three years ago. We do not get funding to take people to main or general hospital appointments. If someone wants to use our services for that purpose, they have to pay the full cost. They will also not get that funding if they live in a suburban area. The town of Hawick is classed as such an area and a lady there who is a wheelchair user and who needs to see a consultant at the Borders general hospital has to pay for those journeys—the social car scheme does not pick up the bill.

Mr McGrigor: I have a question for Mr Smith. Are your vehicles accessible for people who use motorised scooters—is there room also for the scooter?

Niall Smith: Probably not. In fact, some of the wider wheelchairs are now a bit of a problem—getting them on the vehicle is a bit of a squeeze. One of our drivers has raised the issue only in the past couple of weeks.

Mr McGrigor: That is a limitation on your services.

The demand for accessible transport services is expected to rise over time. Does the pace of progress in the provision of those services suggest that we will be able to meet future demand in a coherent and integrated manner?

Niall Smith: No.

Mr McGrigor: Right. I did not think that you would say yes.

Jan Goodall: The question of demand is interesting. Trevor Meadows made it clear that people who believe that they cannot get out do not demand to get out. We have also heard that people cannot demand a service that does not exist. The population of older people who need demand-responsive transport services is likely to rise, but a rise in demand will depend on how the services are publicised and marketed—if they are provided—their reliability and on whether people believe in and trust them.

The pace of progress is not adequate. We are beginning to dip our toes in the water, but we are being slow.

Mr McGrigor: In 1999, the disability rights task force noted:

"For disabled people to be able to travel, and to travel with confidence, all aspects of the 'transport chain' must be accessible."

That confidence will, of course, also depend on safety, affordability and reliability. How far are we from that goal and to what extent are demand-responsive services providing a reliable link in the transport chain?

John Chick: The service that Teviot Wheels offers is mainly a demand-responsive service: somebody phones and asks whether we can take them from A to B and bring them back. Disabled people are, however, being discriminated against: they have to pay a percentage of the cost of the journey, whereas—although the bus service is not demand-responsive—the man next door can catch a bus to the same place and, if he is a pensioner or if he is slightly disabled like me, get a free journey. We are discriminating against the poor person in the wheelchair. That is one of my gripes. I am sorry, but it really annoys me.

The Convener: That is all right. You are allowed to express your gripes. We want to hear them, so do not apologise.

Andy Aitken: The answer to the broad question that Mr McGrigor raised at the beginning is that the pace of progress is nothing like fast enough. We have heard a lot this morning about concerns over what demand, disability and access mean. They each seem to be put into individual silos, so there is no joined-up thinking about what is being accessed. Access is not access to transport; it is

access to services, facilities and so on. Transport enables that access but, at the moment, the pace of progress is too slow.

Stanley Flett: Not so long ago, I attended a conference in London on railways for all. We were addressed by a gentleman in a wheelchair—a very able gentleman—who put a particular scenario to us. He said that we had to ensure that the traveller—especially a person in a wheelchair—is thoroughly comfortable, satisfied and confident that he or she will reach their journey's end and then get back safely. He told us about one particular person who had not slept for about four days because he was going to travel from Glasgow to London—how long he slept while he was in London was never told us. If the backing of the transport industry—be it rail, road, air or whatever—was in place, and would-be travellers were given confidence, that would be a move forwards.

At the conference, people told us that they had a budget of £370 million to make railway stations accessible and step-free. Making some stations step-free would not be possible, but new lifts were being put in. That is working in some places, but not in others. I will doubtless hear more about such issues tomorrow, when I will be in London again for the quarterly meeting of Great North Eastern Railway's disability advisory group. I can certainly forward information from that meeting to the committee.

The budget figure I mentioned is being put towards access for all and railways for all. We cannot forget people in wheelchairs, the walking disabled, and people with visual or hearing impairments, because they are all deserving cases for recognition. They are certainly being catered for in that particular project.

Nora Radcliffe: Will you say a bit more about the impact that you think the concessionary bus scheme will have on your own schemes?

John Chick: It is not having any effect on our schemes because most of the people who use my organisation cannot use the concessionary bus passes. They cannot get their wheelchairs on and off the buses and cannot get to the bus stops.

Nora Radcliffe: Are there people who would have used your scheme because it was marginally cheaper than paying a bus fare but who will now take the bus?

John Chick: No. We are limited in the type of people we can carry. Unless people wanted to pay 40p a mile—which is more expensive than the bus—they would not have wanted to use us in the first place. We look after people in wheelchairs and people who cannot get to the bus stops.

Jan Goodall: If concessionary travel passes could be used on non-scheduled community transport services, that would have a huge impact. It would be a funding stream in itself and would make things more equal for people who, at present, cannot use a bus pass because they cannot get to a bus.

Nora Radcliffe: That is probably a general view.

Witnesses: Yes.

Nora Radcliffe: To what extent is there sufficient consultation with disabled people in order to develop appropriate solutions to accessibility issues?

Niall Smith: Consultation by whom? We consult the people in our area as much as we can. Through our local community care forum we have good connections with all sorts of user support groups, and we have annual meetings to which users of our service come along to tell us what they think. We also consult them through telephone surveys and by distributing written questionnaires. Basically, there is on-going consultation with the people who use our scheme and, through other support groups, with people who do not. Some of the support groups throw up certain needs that we just cannot meet; for example, they may want vehicles that can take four wheelchairs at a time. However, I am not sure what consultation is carried out with disabled people by any other transport provider.

John Chick: We mainly consult our users. They ask us to do something for them and, invariably, we do. We always check that they are getting value for money and that they are happy with the service.

Andy Aitken: That probably applies to most of the community transport organisations. We consult our users broadly, but we are also aware that there are many people in the community who do not have the opportunity to express their views on what they need and want simply because they are confined to their homes. Communication with those people is difficult, in many cases, and the publicity does not seem to reach them.

In some cases, there is a degree of scepticism about the value of that consultation, which is sad. In the past, "consultation" has been said to have taken place, but no action has resulted, so people are a bit dubious about whether the consultation is really of value to them. We have to overcome that hurdle before we can be sure that we know what they want.

Frances Curran: That is an interesting comment about consultation. I imagine that the consultation also brings extra demands on finances, yet the picture that is emerging from this evidence is of services that are run on a shoestring.

The Scottish Executive ran a demand-responsive transport pilot programme, which was scheduled to finish in March. Were you involved with that pilot programme and are you aware of any of its outcomes?

Jan Goodall: Are you talking about the urban initiative? I am not sure what you are referring to.

Frances Curran: Yes, the urban initiative.

Jan Goodall: Stan Flett and I have both been involved in that. The urban community transport initiative has allowed the friendly bus scheme—for which we have community regeneration money for regeneration areas—to be extended to cover the whole city. For us, the main thing is that the money has funded a post in Dundee City Council for a community transport officer—Trevor Docherty, who is here this morning. That is real progress for us.

When we started campaigning in 1992, people in the council had barely heard of dial-a-ride schemes and did not recognise the problem. People were expected to accept that they were housebound. Gradually, over years of campaigning, the situation has changed and attitudes in the council are changing, although departments are still very possessive of their own transport arrangements. Trevor Docherty is doing a lot and is making waves, so I think that, over time, we will move to a system in Dundee that is more integrated and offers greater value for money. Trevor's post has been invaluable.

12:30

Stanley Flett: In spite of what I have said about the dial-a-bus service in Aberdeen, I hope that it will rise—not from the ashes, because it has not gone down so far and there is certainly great hope for it. Indeed, the more publicity we can give it and the more we can educate the people who would use it, the better. As has been said, things do not happen overnight. Word of mouth is an important way of advertising. People who have had the great pleasure of getting from their own front doorsteps to wherever tell their friends, who then get to use the service.

The only problem is that, as I have said before, if we are given half a bus, I would be worried if the engine was not there.

The Convener: The wheels might be handy as well, Stanley.

Stanley Flett: Yes, provided that the tyres are not flat.

Frances Curran: We have been consulting for a while now and the consultees have told us that the 2020 deadline for the accessibility of transport vehicles is far too long to wait—if Stanley Flett has

only half a vehicle, he will probably have to wait even longer. What are the witnesses' views on the various deadlines for accessibility for different modes of transport and what challenges do we face in dealing with the gaps in the meantime—the back end of the bus in Stanley's case?

Niall Smith: The vast majority of our passengers will be dead long before the deadline. In the meantime, we will have to find other ways of providing services, which are welcome but are run on a shoestring.

Jan Goodall: I have a problem with taxis. The deadline is far too far ahead. At one time, we were told that all taxis would have to be wheelchair accessible by that deadline, which is not what disabled people need. Some people need that, but some people cannot use the London cab-type taxi. I understand that there are moves to alter that requirement. I hope that it will not come to pass because it will mean many problems for many people if it does.

Stanley Flett: The Scottish Accessible Transport Alliance, of which I am the chair—which is why I have so many grey hairs—has petitioned for accessible and affordable taxis. We want 50 per cent compliance, not 100 per cent. In the north-east, 100 per cent compliance is causing all sorts of problems at the moment because people were supposed to be buying vehicles that were fully accessible for wheelchair users—there was all sorts of nonsense about that. The fact is that many disabled people cannot get into high vehicles because they cannot lift their feet. There are now vehicles with hydraulic seats, for example, but using them is difficult and quite scary for some people, who would far more happily use a saloon car than a high vehicle. Therefore, 100 per cent compliance is out the window.

Marlyn Glen: What specific challenges does your location—rural, urban or suburban—pose for transport services?

Andy Aitken: The area in which we operate is pretty well wholly rural. The density of population is about 60 people per square mile, compared with the average of 160 people. That raises difficulties other than those associated with the provision of services for people with disabilities. Rural isolation has an effect on young parents with families, who have only one car that is away all day because the husband is the breadwinner, and on young people who cannot access any of the leisure facilities in the main towns because there are no mainstream bus services, and so on. The challenge is much wider than the challenge of providing services for people with disability; it is about rural isolation, as well.

I am sure that the urban operators will have other issues, but our rural location provides us

with many problems. Sports groups and youth groups want buses in the evening, as will groups of old-age pensioners who want to go to the theatre. There is conflicting demand for the vehicles, which is sometimes difficult to meet.

Stanley Flett: In Aberdeen, about 95 per cent of services are covered by low-floor buses, although we still have some old double-deckers that some people find difficult to use. On the railways, through the North East of Scotland Transport Partnership, we have a cross-rail service from Stonehaven to Inverurie that is proving to be quite useful at certain times of day.

The low-floor bus is a godsend to a lot of people with walking disabilities. I was at the launch of the first low-floor bus way back in the 1990s, when I was a member of DPTAC. We were chasing around Hounslow in one of these things and it was quite scary—I do not think that the driver knew too much about where he was going. The low-floor bus is certainly a great blessing to older people and to younger people with buggies and young children, too. They are classed as people who are disabled if they have messages and a buggy with a young child in it, as they are restricted—that is probably the right way to put it.

Jan Goodall: In Dundee, we have a large problem of deprivation, with people who are on low incomes and have little access to private cars. Some bus services finish at 7 in the evening; some do not run on Sundays; and some run only infrequently on Sundays. It is a matter of promoting social inclusion and combating poverty. Like fuel, transport can be a poverty issue in terms of the proportion of people's income that needs to be spent if they are to go out and about. I am talking not just about people with disabilities, but about young people, in particular, who might want to go somewhere in the early evening. If the bus service stops running after they have got there, they have to take a taxi home or walk, which is not always safe or practical.

Niall Smith: Caithness is a pretty sparsely populated area in which people have to travel long distances to access many services. Most of the bus services stop at about half past 5 at night and I do not think that we have any buses in the county that have low-access platforms, so the buses are not accessible to disabled people. Additionally, many people live at the end of long, rough tracks and it is difficult for them to access any form of transport. Many couples retire into the area. If the partner who drives the car dies, the other is left isolated, with no personal transport and often not knowing anyone in the community, so they have no access to support.

Because of the distances and the scattered nature of the population, the costs are high in delivering any sort of service in Caithness. Even if

an operator charges a low rate per mile, the cost will often be many pounds for a single journey, and there will be a massive amount of dead mileage when the operator is not carrying anyone but still has to operate the vehicle. When driver time and all the other costs are taken into account, there are very high costs involved in delivering a service to a very low number of people. In the context of competitive bidding for funding, that may not look so attractive.

Marlyn Glen: Evidence that we have taken and Executive-commissioned research have both highlighted that the attitudes of transport staff can cause problems for disabled people and impact on their confidence to travel. What should be done to improve staff attitudes towards disabled people?

Stanley Flett: We are talking about an extremely serious matter, on which a deaf, dumb and partially blind gentleman made an inquiry to me just the other day. Nowadays someone who holds a pass—both he and I hold one—must tell the bus driver where they are going. I tried to get hold of George Mair and although I did not manage to speak to him, I told someone in his office that I would chase him up on the issue. We must get round the problem. Buses in Aberdeen now have scanners—if First in Aberdeen, where it is based, cannot have them, who can? The fact that passengers must say where they are going threw the gentleman totally. We are examining the issue.

Throughout the country, attitudes of drivers can be inappropriate, although some drivers are helpful and nice and have a human side. The same might not be true of someone who is running 20 minutes late, who is being asked by control where he is and who has a massive queue of passengers at the bus stop. There are many different scenarios. We are human beings. The bus companies must provide training; most of them do, but I am not certain that their staff can stick to it and be human at the same time.

Jan Goodall: There is a big problem to do with attitudes, partly because of the range of disabilities that people have, which is difficult to understand. Another problem is the turnover of transport staff; the bus companies must go on and on training staff. We must think about society's general attitude to disability and, in that regard, primary schools would be the best place to start. If society's general attitude were improved such that people accepted and made allowance for people's disabilities, that would improve the transport situation.

I do not know whether members have heard of the thistle card scheme, whereby people would show a little plastic card the size of a credit card to indicate to transport staff that they had special needs. That scheme seems to have died a death,

although I think that the transport strategy consultation document that has just come out says that there is a plan to relaunch it. I hope that much more energy will be put in this time and that the scheme will not fade again.

Marlyn Glen: I think that thistle cards are still used in some areas, but not across the board.

John Chick: The drivers are the people who need training; or rather, they need to be pointed in the right direction. I will give an example. There is a 77-year-old gentleman in our village who is very contrary. He has to go to the doctor's every morning to get an injection. He goes by bus because the bus stop is only 50yd from his house. On the way back, he likes to call in at the local pub for a pint. He has two walking sticks, so most of the drivers will drop him off, but some drivers say, "That's more than my job's worth," and drop him off at the bus stop, which is 200yd down the road, even though that involves going past his house. Individual drivers make their own decisions, in spite of the fact that buses on rural routes are supposed to stop whenever a passenger asks them to.

Niall Smith: In our service, part of what we look for when we recruit is the display of appropriate attitudes. On top of that, people receive training and the message is constantly reinforced. We do random checks by contacting service users to find out whether they are happy with the attitudes of drivers and the co-ordinator. When situations arise, they usually involve a passenger going to the co-ordinator because the vehicle has not been able to turn up at the time for which it was booked as a result of delays with pick-ups and drop-offs, or because someone cannot get a service when they need it. Attitude is dealt with in recruitment and training and is reinforced with the co-ordinator.

12:45

Ms White: We talked earlier about buses and trains not turning up on time. If a bus or train is delayed or cancelled, which leaves people waiting, does that put extra pressure on your services? I know that some services do not run after 6 o'clock anyway.

Niall Smith: The people who use our service tend not to be able to use other transport services, so it is rare for someone to want to tie in our service with other services. The situation that you describe would not really have an impact on our service. Cancellations of our service, which unfortunately happen from time to time, would obviously affect our users.

Ms White: So timetabling issues would not affect your services.

Niall Smith: They would not affect them significantly.

The Convener: Would it make a difference to your service if there were no bus services after 5 o'clock in the evening or on Sundays?

Niall Smith: We use volunteers at the weekend and after certain hours, so we are sometimes able to provide services then. If our service is not available, there is no service.

Andy Aitken: A significant amount of our work is taking community groups to meetings, sporting events or into town. The fact that there are no bus services after 5 or 6 pm means that there is a greater demand for our services, but that demand is not generally from individuals.

John Chick: Our service is basically a dial-a-ride service for people who want to go somewhere. The majority of our registered users have their own registered driver, but we have to find volunteer drivers for the ones who do not. It is difficult to get a volunteer driver who is prepared to go and pick up a disabled lady at 6 o'clock at night, drive her down to Newcastle to a pop concert and then bring her back at 2 in the morning. That is where we are finding problems. I have been a volunteer driver and some of the journeys that I have had to do have meant that I have been away over weekends, which is not good for drivers' family life.

Ms White: You run a specialised service. In our consultations, people have told us time and again that it is difficult to access information. How could the provision of information for disabled people be improved? Do you have specialised ways of providing information on the services that you offer?

John Chick: We have formed a forum in the Borders, which is called Borders community transport together, which involves me, three sister organisations, the Women's Royal Voluntary Service, the British Red Cross, the Scottish Ambulance Service and Scottish Borders Council. In June, we will publish a leaflet showing what services are available, which will be distributed through health centres and with the newsletters of voluntary organisations in the Borders. Word will get around that way. The forum has been successful; we have managed to achieve quite a bit together.

Andy Aitken: As far as scheduled bus services are concerned, when a timetable change takes place, it might be publicised once in the local paper, after which there is no further communication about it. Timetables are available from the bus station or local shops or post offices, but how do people get there? There is definitely a need for better communication.

Everybody who uses our service must be a registered member of the Annandale Transport Initiative. We communicate to our members

through direct mail. Many people do not like direct mail coming from unknown sources, so we are in a catch-22 situation. Local radio is another way of communicating effectively. Even when low-floor buses are put on to routes, there is little publicity about that, so people do not know that the service is available.

Niall Smith: We advertise our service in several ways. Our co-ordinator goes to local groups, such as the Scottish Women's Rural Institutes, to talk about our service. We publish leaflets about the availability of the service and have information in surgeries. In medical centres in the big towns, we use the scrolling information on the television. We also use the local community website. We put information in the Caithness community care forum's newsletter, of which there are about 2,000 copies, which go to people who receive care in the community. There is a wide range of ways of getting out information.

It is difficult to get hold of information on ordinary services. For instance, in trying to find out when I could get a train from Inverness to Edinburgh for this meeting, I discovered that my old computer could not open the PDF file that was the only way of getting the train timetable from the internet. I had to guess when I had to leave my house in the morning to get from Caithness to Inverness to get the train. Getting information is difficult.

Stanley Flett: Stagecoach Bluebird, which operates in the Aberdeen area, was approached by an access panel because some of the members wanted large-print bus timetables. At first, the company held its breath, because printing large-print timetables for every bus service in the area would mean cutting down more trees. However, a pilot scheme is being considered through which people will be able to get a large-print timetable of services from where they live into the centre of Aberdeen and back again. Goodness only knows whether the scheme will branch out, but the issue is being considered. I look forward to finding out what the take-up will be.

The Convener: I thank the witnesses for their evidence, which was helpful.

12:52

Meeting continued in private until 12:59.

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