EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE

Tuesday 9 May 2006

Session 2

£5.00

Produced and published in Scotland on behalf of the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body by Astron.

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EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE

10th Meeting 2006, Session 2

CONVENER

*Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

Nora Radcliffe (Gordon) (LD)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Frances Curran (West of Scotland) (SSP)
Marlyn Glen (North East Scotland) (Lab)
*Marilyn Livingstone (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)
*Mr Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Elaine Smith (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
John Swinburne (Central Scotland) (SSCUP)
*Ms Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP)

COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTES

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

*attended

THE FOLLOWING GAVE EVIDENCE:

Dr Gregory Burke (DisabledGo)
Basil Haddad (Scottish Executive Enterprise, Transport and Lifelong Learning Department)
Stephen Harvey (Scottish Accessible Information Forum)
Grant Kennedy (Direct Enquiries Ltd)
Lionel Long (Update)
Tavish Scott (Minister for Transport and Telecommunications)

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 9 May 2006

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 09:30*]

Prohibition of Female Genital Mutilation (Scotland) Act 2005

The Convener (Cathy Peattie): I open the 10th meeting of the Equal Opportunities Committee in 2006. I remind all those present that mobile phones should be turned off completely, as they interfere with the sound system. I have received apologies from Frances Curran, Marlyn Glen, Nora Radcliffe, Elaine Smith and John Swinburne.

I propose to take items 2 to 4 first, as the Minister for Transport and Telecommunications is likely to be late. Are members happy with that?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: Item 2 deals with correspondence from the Deputy Minister for Justice in relation to the Prohibition of Female Genital Mutilation (Scotland) Act 2005. I invite general comments on the deputy minister's response.

Ms Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP): I was a bit concerned about the funding allocation being a one-off. In his letter, the deputy minister mentions his hope that other funders might take on the costs. Could we write back to him and ask whether groups such as the Somali women's action group in Glasgow have been informed of which organisations they can apply to for funding, and how to go about doing that? I would also like to know when the women's group from Sheffield, which the deputy minister mentions in his letter, is going to come up to Scotland to carry out some monitoring. Could we perhaps get a timescale for that? It would also be useful to know where exactly that group will go.

The Convener: We had anticipated that resources would be available to deal with some of the issues around FGM. The short-term nature of the resources is perhaps not what we expected. I invite further comments. Paragraph 7 of the clerk's paper says:

> "Members will note from the letter from the Deputy Minister that no indication is given about reviewing the provision of guidance, education and training to ensure that the issues raised are kept high profile in the affected communities in future years."

We could cover that by asking about future funding and so on.

Marilyn Livingstone (Kirkcaldy) (Lab): Paragraph 3 of the minister's letter says:

> "There are additional grant funding options available to these communities, such as the Race Equality, Integration and Community Support Fund which is administered by the Development Department."

Can the organisations therefore make bids? Do we know how much could be given, and over what period?

The Convener: No, we do not know that.

Marilyn Livingstone: If a grant was available for, say, a three-year period, that might—

The Convener: Certainly, the funds will be administered by outside organisations. We do not know the answer to your questions, but we can ask for clarification. My real concern is about the lack of emphasis on issues such as training, which we felt were important.

Marilyn Livingstone: If we knew what money was available, would that resolve some of our questions? I would like some clarification on how the money could helpfully be used.

The Convener: We know only that it is a bidding process—funding is not automatic. Organisations such as the Somali women's action group might need support to apply for money.

Marilyn Livingstone: I would like a bit of clarification on that paragraph of the minister's letter in particular, if that is okay.

The Convener: Yes, that is fine. We will await a further response.

Petition

Care Homes (PE522)

09:34

The Convener: The next item on our agenda is our further consideration of petition PE522, on care homes for young physically disabled people. Does any member have a comment on the petition?

Ms White: I am disappointed in the Health Committee's response. The committee says that its full agenda means that it cannot take on board PE522. However, the subject of the petition is of real concern to people with young disabled kids.

In the paper from the clerks, I note that the Scottish Executive Health Department analytical health division's "A Scoping Study on the Needs of, and Services to, Younger Disabled People Including Those With Early Onset Dementia in Scotland" did not mention the provision of care homes for young physically disabled people. Would it be worth while for us to write to the Executive to ask whether it will look at the issue again, or is that outwith our remit?

The Convener: We have already done that. The petition has done the rounds; we need to deal with it today. Does Marilyn Livingstone have a question?

Marilyn Livingstone: No. I was just thinking about the best way in which we can take forward the petition.

The Convener: I think that we have exhausted all the options.

Marilyn Livingstone: I was just wondering whether there was another route.

The Convener: The Health Committee has made it clear that its workload means that it cannot deal with the petition. It is not appropriate for us to leave the petition on our agenda for much longer; we need to deal with it today. The Health Committee told us that it has no plans to deal with the issue. Do members agree that, in light of the points that are noted in paragraph 7 of the paper, we take no further action on the petition?

Ms White: Unfortunately, there is not a lot more that we can do. I agree with the recommendation in the paper.

Marilyn Livingstone: Perhaps we can address some of the points that are raised in the petition as part of our disability inquiry.

The Convener: The issue has not been raised in the inquiry, despite our going up and down the country and speaking to a host of people. The issue does not come within the remit of the inquiry, in terms of removing barriers. I am sorry, but the suggestion is unrealistic.

Marilyn Livingstone: Yes, I can see that. It would serve only to raise expectations. Committee members want to help, but we will have to agree to the recommendation.

The Convener: You are absolutely right. In our letter to the petitioner, we will say that we have reluctantly closed the petition and that, as we had nowhere else to send it, we had no other option.

Are we agreed?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Age

09:38

The Convener: Under the next item, we are to consider a paper on the committee's taking stock exercise on age issues. Does any member have a comment on the paper?

Ms White: I am quite happy to go along with the revised timescale, which I hope the committee will support. I thank Zoé Tough and the rest of the clerking team for the work that they have done. We will further publicise the exercise as set out in the paper. I will raise the issue at the next meeting of the cross-party group on older people, age and aging. Zoé will provide me with papers for the meeting.

The Convener: That is fine. I seek members' approval of the points that are outlined in paragraph 4 of the paper. We are asked to agree the revised timescale; that the committee's age reporter works with the clerks to promote the exercise further; and that we copy to the Scottish Executive the responses to our call for evidence that we receive by 2 June 2006. Are we agreed?

Members *indicated agreement*.

09:39

Meeting suspended.

09:51

On resuming—

Disability Inquiry

The Convener: I remind members that mobile phones should be switched off.

I welcome the Minister for Transport and Telecommunications, Tavish Scott, who is supported by Basil Haddad and Tom Macdonald from the Scottish Executive. I am glad that you got here safely, minister. Would you like to make an opening statement?

The Minister for Transport and Telecommunications (Tavish Scott): Yes. First, I apologise for being late. Various modes of transport held me up this morning, as did the fact that our capital city's airport was about as busy as it gets at 10 to 9 on the average weekday morning.

With your agreement, I will announce some positions that are relevant to the committee in relation to the establishment of the public transport users committee for Scotland. There are implications for several organisations, but one that will be of interest to committee colleagues relates to the recent consultation on the future of the Mobility and Access Committee for Scotland. I thought that it would be appropriate to talk about that this morning.

Members will be familiar with the work that MACS does in advising ministers and others on transport issues. It is important to recognise that it advises not just me but other ministers, across portfolios, on a range of issues. I have decided that MACS should continue to carry out that work in its current form and with its current functions. Those functions will not be transferred to the public transport users committee, as was suggested in the consultation paper; MACS will remain an independent, advisory, non-departmental public body. There are strong policy arguments and reasons of efficient government for seeking closer working between MACS and the new body, and I will look to the organisations to build a strong working relationship from the outset.

Both MACS and the DPTAC, or the Disabled Persons Transport Advisory Committee—this is a wonderful world of acronyms—suggested that the relationship between MACS and the public transport users committee should be reviewed in five to 10 years' time. I agree that the review should happen, but I think that five to 10 years is too far away. There will, therefore, be a review in three years' time, once the passenger transport users committee is up and running. Many of its members will be coming to the end of their first term of appointment at that point, so that will be an appropriate moment to consider the arrangements.

My officials will work closely with MACS and the new passenger transport users committee to seek synergies in the form of shared secretariat services, shared accommodation and a shared budget. As with all such organisations, it is logical and relevant that we bring those disciplines to bear. I hope that the arrangements will ensure that all passengers have a strong voice; that MACS will continue to work in the interests of disabled persons; and that the interests of the taxpayer, who funds the bodies, will be protected.

The public transport users committee's remit will cover cross-cutting issues, such as integration and accessibility for all users, whether disabled or not. Meanwhile, MACS will continue its work on disability and transport. Therefore, some scope for duplication is inevitable. I recognise that and make it clear that that is why the review will be important. Both bodies must work closely together and must be clear about their remits. They must both be credible and influential players and should be a model for others.

I hope that the convener will forgive my indulgence in bringing the matter before the committee. I am happy to take questions.

The Convener: We welcome the fact that you have brought that information to the committee. As you would expect, we have a number of questions for you this morning. I will ask the first few questions.

Many disabled people have expressed to the committee their unhappiness with the statutory deadlines that apply to the accessibility requirements for buses, coaches and trains. What can the Executive do, and what is it doing, to improve the situation for disabled people?

Tavish Scott: The committee will be aware that many of the statutory deadlines relate to reserved issues. We have on-going discussions with the Department for Transport in London at official and ministerial level: there are discussions with ministers, there is dialogue between officials and there are working groups at official level.

To be blunt, I am not aware that any arrangements are being considered to bring forward or change the timescales for the modes of transport that you mention, not least because of the significant cost that would be brought to bear on businesses and on the taxpayer. Ultimately, you and I—as taxpayers—pay for the improvements in the rail sector. That is as it should be. In the bus sector in particular, a balance must be struck between establishing a timetable that the industry must meet and ensuring that it meets that timetable as part of an investment programme of replacement and improvement of the bus stock in general. We will continue to keep the matter under review, but that is the current position.

The Convener: Is the Executive doing anything to encourage providers to meet the requirements earlier than specified, in particular in relation to buses?

Tavish Scott: Yes. It would be fair to say that there is a live discussion. Tom Macdonald and the other members of the bus team are taking the issue forward in their regular discussions with the industry. I was at the Confederation of Passenger Transport's recent annual conference, and we discussed the issue both informally and formally.

The Convener: That is good. How does the Executive ensure that equality considerations are mainstreamed into the work of Transport Scotland and the other organisations that are involved?

Tavish Scott: Equality considerations are one of the core principles of the Scottish transport appraisal guidance analysis that we do on all transport projects of any size. The national transport strategy consultation also offers people an opportunity to raise those issues and push them forward. The work that the Equal Opportunities Committee does to influence Government policy generally is also important. It will be interesting to see the committee's conclusions.

The Executive uses a number of mechanisms. Some are internal, but others take the form of pressure that is put on us. It is right that appropriate parliamentary pressure should be put on us to keep the agenda moving forward. We will continue to work on the matter.

The Convener: The committee is aware that the Executive has carried out research into improving transport for disabled people, although the outcome of the research has not yet been published. Can the committee expect to see any action being taken as a result of that research?

Tavish Scott: Yes. First, I should say that I would be happy to share the research with the committee. We could discuss with the clerks the possibility of arranging an informal briefing from the team.

I do not believe in meetings for the sake of meetings or research for the sake of research. I know that a lot of academics disagree with me on that, but there we go. When research is being paid for from my budget, I am keen to get something for the money. The research needs to assist us in our policy development and in the direction of travel that we wish to take in the national transport strategy and in the regional transport strategies, which I argue will also be extremely important in this area. The regional transport partnerships will produce their strategies over the next few months. Once we have seen the research, it must be used effectively.

The Convener: Are you hopeful that the research will enable the Executive to develop a strategic approach to delivering accessible transport?

10:00

Tavish Scott: Yes. I hope that it will help us to augment what we are already doing. There is a reasonably strong picture of the development of transport projects, taking into account the need to make those transport services as accessible to users as they possibly can be. We will continue to build on that across all modes of transport where we have the powers to do so.

The Convener: In evidence last week, the committee heard how important it is to carry out careful and meaningful consultation with disabled people to identify their needs in relation to transport services. What consultation was carried out with disabled people during the research into improving transport for disabled people?

Tavish Scott: Basil Haddad will deal with that question; I do not know the answer, to be honest.

Basil Haddad (Scottish Executive Enterprise, Transport and Lifelong Learning Department): The organisation that did the consultation met several disabled people and 10 case studies were carried out in which disabled people were asked how they deal with the problems that they have in getting from place to place. The research takes that into consideration. We are looking to make the research public later this month, and all the information will be made available to the committee.

The Convener: It is very important that people are involved and that they know what is happening.

There are three strands to our inquiry: education, lifelong learning and leisure. It appears that one of the biggest barriers running through all three strands is transport. If people cannot get transport to where they need to be, they still face barriers, so consultation is vital.

Basil Haddad: Yes.

Mr Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con): What has been done to ensure the accessibility of the Executive's national transport strategy consultation process to the large numbers of disabled people in Scotland who are affected by this crucial issue?

Tavish Scott: I said in an earlier answer to the convener that the principles of accessibility are core to the consultation. Under the strategic projects review—the practical outcomes of which I am particularly interested in—strategies go through the STAG process, which also encapsulates the principles of accessibility for people with disabilities. I would argue strongly that those principles are being included in the consultation that is under way. We will of course look to organisations across the spectrum, including MACS, to give us further advice during the consultation process. I hope that we can act on some solid evidence.

Mr McGrigor: We have heard that it is not enough just to make modes of transport accessible, and that we have to solve people's access problems more generally. Although I welcome the Executive's recognition of that in the national transport strategy, what is the Executive doing to enable those disabled people who do not currently travel to get access to transport services and to be confident that all the links in their required transport chain will be in place as they go to and from their destination?

Tavish Scott: With the greatest respect, I do not think that any Government can ensure that all the links will be there. We all have experience from our own parts of Scotland about the practical difficulties for people who have disabilities. I am not very keen on sweeping generalisations about satisfying everyone and sorting all the problems; I am sure that Mr McGrigor would agree with me on that.

I would be very happy to consider evidence of breakdowns in the system. I accept that there will always be examples, but I would rather consider the evidence of a practical problem than give a bland, general answer to Mr McGrigor's question.

Mr McGrigor: Fair enough.

Marilyn Livingstone: I have an example that might help you, minister. We have taken evidence from people who say that they cannot do anything on the spur of the moment. There is no spontaneity in their lives. They have to plan at least 48 hours ahead to be able to get the right train, for example. We took evidence from a person who told us about the difficulties that they have in getting from Fife to the west of Scotland. If they miss one link, or if their train arrives at a different platform that might not be accessible, they will miss the next link and the whole thing becomes horrendous.

There are two points. First, disabled people often have to know what they are doing 48 hours in advance so that they can book support and help. Secondly, people in rural areas told us that it is difficult to get around at the weekends or after teatime and that people can be stuck in their communities. We heard that from some young people in Wick who said that, if they lived outside the town, it was impossible to get to Wick in the evening because the buses stopped at teatime. Unless they had family members who could take them into the town, they couldn't even get to the pub.

We heard from disabled people that they cannot just make up their minds that they want to go and see their friends in the evening because there are so many difficulties. If they miss one link, especially on the trains, the situation can escalate into a huge problem and they can miss two or three links. I do not know whether that helps, but that is what we were told.

Tavish Scott: Thank you—I understand the point that is being made. On the rail network, at both Network Rail stations and First ScotRail stations, there is a programme of improving accessibility. We can provide you with the numbers behind that work if that would be helpful, although I hope that the information has already been made available to the committee.

Marilyn Livingstone will be entirely familiar with the work that is being done in Fife, given earlier discussions on rail services and stations in Fife. I absolutely accept the need to continue to make progress on accessibility at stations. In fairness to First ScotRail, it has a programme on that, and work is taking place not just on the physical infrastructure but on training station and train staff. Of course, there are issues about manned and unmanned stations that are germane to the point.

I accept Marilyn Livingstone's contention that, if a link is missed, the individual's journey becomes a lot more difficult. I also accept the point about planning for journeys. We all have to plan journeys to some extent, but it is more of a challenge for someone who is in a wheelchair or is partially sighted. We can work again with and look closely at the travel information services that we fund, which include both internet and telephone-based services, and make sure that they are appropriate and user friendly. Again, I would strongly welcome any evidence that the committee has taken that would help us to look closely at the practical solutions that people have found.

I take Marilyn Livingstone's point about Wick, although my kids—who are, thankfully, by the grace of God, very healthy—would argue that they face exactly the same problems with travelling in from rural parts of my constituency. Many members, quite rightly, ask me questions about general transport services in that context, so I do not think that the problem is unique to people who have disabilities. However, I accept that it is an issue.

I strongly believe that regional transport partnerships and local authorities are best placed to drive policy and find practical solutions. Frankly, it is wrong to expect the Government in Edinburgh to know how to solve a problem in rural Fife or Caithness. Fife Council or Highland Council are much better placed to make those assessments. Obviously, we provide assistance in that regard through the grant-aided expenditure mechanism and other local government funding.

There is one additional element on which we would be happy to provide the committee with as much information as you would like. We have been piloting both urban and rural demand-responsive transport systems to try to tackle the matter, and we are taking those pilots forward in the next three-year programme. It would be helpful if the committee came up with some evidence that would help me to argue for the continuation of the DRT proposals. I know that they help from many practical points of view.

The Convener: We intend to ask you some more questions on that.

Marilyn Livingstone: I agree that local solutions are important and that regional transport partnerships have a role to play.

The committee found it interesting that, although there were obviously examples of best practice around the country, there is no forum for sharing that information. All the authorities told us that there were gaps in provision, but they said that there was no forum for discussing, for example, good ideas from Tayside on how to deal with particular problems. We would like such a forum to be set up.

Tavish Scott: I would welcome a strong recommendation in the committee's report on that. I would have to look closely at what Marilyn Livingstone said, but my best guess about how we can take forward her suggestion is to do so through the guidance that we provide to regional transport partnerships. They are in the best position to oversee their regions and could come together to address the fair points that she raised about best practice.

Mr McGrigor: On that issue, page 32 of the document "Scotland's National Transport Strategy: A Consultation" notes that Transport Scotland has a role in disseminating good practice on skills across the industry. How will the Executive monitor and evaluate Transport Scotland's performance in that area, particularly in relation to accessibility issues?

Tavish Scott: I will need to come back to Mr McGrigor on the precise mechanism for monitoring, but in many ways one of MACS's central roles is to provide advice to ministers about such issues. The chairman and the board of MACS are seized of what the formulation of Transport Scotland could mean for the delivery of projects and of the need to ensure that MACS's voice is heard in the process. Off the top of my head, I suspect that I would look to MACS, as the statutory body, to provide me and other ministers with advice in this area. In addition, there is the obvious point that Transport Scotland is an agency that is a servant of MSPs, so I have no doubt that there will be plenty of parliamentary scrutiny of its activities.

Mr McGrigor: I have a final question on the national transport strategy consultation. The Executive notes in paragraph 42 of the consultation document that it has consulted widely on what the strategic priorities for Scotland's railways should be. Has that consultation process already identified the importance of accessibility and, if so, what are the Executive's plans to improve the accessibility of Scotland's railways?

Tavish Scott: Yes, the Executive has considered accessibility and our programmes to improve accessibility at stations and the design of rolling stock demonstrate that. The First ScotRail franchise is in its second year and when officials were assessing the bids, accessibility was a strong consideration in making recommendations on the franchise. First ScotRail will implement a considerable accessibility programme during its franchise. Again, we would be happy to furnish the committee with facts and figures on that, if that would be helpful.

Mr McGrigor: Is it possible for more to be done to make rolling stock and railway stations as accessible as airports for disabled people?

Tavish Scott: It depends on what you mean by accessibility at airports, Mr McGrigor. You and I are familiar with airports in the west Highlands and in the islands where accessibility is a challenge if someone has to go for a hospital appointment, for example. I am aware of that situation as a constituency MSP for an island area. Do all the airports have air bridges? The answer is no, because it depends on the size of the airport and, for the shorter routes, on the size of the airplane. It is genuinely difficult to make direct comparisons between aviation and rail as regards accessibility. I certainly accept the premise of Mr McGrigor's question, which is that we should always seek to improve accessibility. However, we must accept that, in aviation, accessibility can mean using an ambilift to get on to an aircraft and that even then particularly small aircraft sometimes cannot be coped with. Therefore, there are accessibility issues at airports as well as at railway stations.

10:15

Marilyn Livingstone: We have talked quite a bit about the accessibility of stations. You travelled on the train with us through Fife, and I know that you are aware of the issues about the accessibility of stations not just in Fife, but throughout the country. We are going to get some information from you about the upgrading of stations. What will the Executive do to ensure that, where upgrading is not deemed possible, suitable alternative provision is put in place?

Tavish Scott: That is a fair question. We have a programme and continue to work at the stations where that programme can improve accessibility. The short-term answer is that if a specific station has no facilities for people with disabilities of whatever variety we need to find ways in which they can be helped to get to a station where there are those facilities—a station that is compliant with the requirement for full accessibility.

We cannot change the whole picture overnight because of the number of stations that we have and the investment that that would take. What would I cut in other areas to make such an investment? The programme will be reasonably well thought through and I will always take advice from MACS and other organisations that want to present views and ideas about which stations should be targeted for improvements. I hope that we will make reasonably rational decisions about where that targeted investment should take place.

Marilyn Livingstone: How will the Executive ensure that accessibility issues are mainstreamed in procurement exercises? You have talked about the franchising, but how about procurement exercises in relation to transport services—for example, in relation to the lifeline air and ferry services for which the Executive is currently undertaking major tendering exercises?

Tavish Scott: Ferries have to comply with appropriate United Kingdom and European legislation on such matters, and it would be fair to say that Caledonian MacBrayne works hard on that. The tendering exercise will ensure that the tender specification—which is subject to both consultation and parliamentary observation—will also take the matter into account. There are a number of strands to ensuring that that can happen.

Our influence on lifeline air services extends only to where there are public service obligations—Barra, Campbeltown and Tiree. The internal services in some islands are a matter for local authorities and they are able to influence provision through specifications and through the legislation that governs such matters. There are practical issues around aircraft types and so on, but we hope to influence provision through that process and through the tender specification.

Marilyn Livingstone: I would like to ask one or two questions about demand-responsive transport. What is the current situation with the pilot programme and what are your long-term plans for demand-responsive transport?

Tavish Scott: As I said to the convener earlier, demand-responsive transport has a strong role to play in Scotland, not just for the audience that the inquiry focuses on but generally in Scotland. A number of us will have reflected on that from our experiences in our own areas. I want the pilot programmes to continue, as we need to continue to evaluate the best and most effective way to take forward demand-responsive transport—inevitably, in the context of budgetary constraints.

I am conscious that we are spending £159 million to £163 million on a national concessionary travel scheme. Although it will be a great step forward across the country, it will not hit everyone. We need to find ways to develop our use of demand-responsive transport. One way in which we will do that will be to assess where the gaps are as the national scheme progresses over the next two years. Strong evidence from the committee would be helpful.

Marilyn Livingstone: One of the main issues that we keep coming across in evidence is the complexity of funding. This is probably a difficult question to answer, but what can the Executive do to streamline the current complex funding systems on which community transport initiatives seem to depend? Funding can rise and fall and there can be funding one year, but not the next. Users might become dependent on a successful community transport initiative, but if the funding or the criteria for it change, they might have to go cap in hand to different funding providers to maintain the service. We have heard examples of people losing services. One plea that has been made to us is to consider how to streamline the funding.

Tavish Scott: To be brutally honest, I do not have an easy answer to that. We reflected on the matter in Stewart Stevenson's recent members' business debate on Banffshire Partnership Ltd and Buchan Dial-a-Community Bus, which champions what community transport should be about. That great project does many good things, but Stewart Stevenson initiated that debate to raise the issue of funding.

I am happy to consider ways of streamlining funding, but my bitter experience tells me that if we streamline funding, we might end up with a national funding pot. Local authorities would be unhappy with any proposal to remove their funding for transport that is badged appropriately as community transport. Such transport is best delivered by local practitioners and groups that come together to work out the best transport solutions for their community. We depend on local authorities to present arguments and—dare I say—make bids for funding from the central Government pot to meet agreed local and national objectives on accessibility and social inclusion.

There is no easy answer to the question, but if the committee produces evidence that the multiplicity of funding sources is influencing adversely the development of community projects, we will be happy to consider it.

Ms White: Last week, we heard evidence that people cannot access free demand-responsive transport for a hospital appointment but can access it for a doctor's appointment. I understand what you are saying about community transport and local authorities. However, do you envisage that the concessionary travel scheme could apply to demand-responsive transport some way down the line?

Tavish Scott: I hope that Sandra White will forgive me for not making policy on the hoof. I believe that both scheduled services, which already come under the concessionary scheme, and non-scheduled services—the provision of which is the principle of demand-responsive transport—have a crucial role to play in the design of transport services to meet the objectives that the committee is considering so carefully. There is a judgment call to be made about how best to do that.

I said in response to questions from the convener and Marilyn Livingstone that I was interested in finding the best mechanism for using taxpayers' money to assist in the delivery of such services. I want to ensure that we do not take a big-Government approach and make decisions in Edinburgh when people in Glasgow, Fife or the Highlands will have a much better idea about how to devise and design services for their areas. It is intrinsically better for such decisions to be made at a regional transport partnership level or local authority level on the basis of best practice, which Marilyn Livingstone mentioned. That is where we need to go on the issue, but evidence on the subject would be gratefully received.

Mr McGrigor: I have one or two questions on rural transport. To what extent do you consider the current level of ring-fenced funding that is provided for the rural community transport initiative to be adequate for the long-term needs of rural communities, and do you consider that ring fencing is the best policy?

Tavish Scott: The answer to the question of why the fund is set up as it is relates, to some extent, to the answer that I gave a moment ago about how best we can devise such services, whether in the Borders or in deepest rural Ayrshire, never mind in the Highlands and Islands. There are rural issues right across the country, with which we are all pretty familiar. It is important constantly to evaluate the best way of delivering innovative services, because people's expectations and users' requirements change. That is an argument for imaginative and innovative policy making at local level when it comes to devising such systems. If the committee has specific concerns about how the scheme is operating—on the basis, I hope, of strong evidence—I would be happy to consider it and any element of the scheme that is not effective. My inbox is not overloaded with messages from local authorities giving me a hard time about the scheme at the moment, but I stand to be corrected if I am wrong.

Mr McGrigor: Given that the need for accessible transport services is likely to increase over time, what plans are there to keep the level of funding under review?

Tavish Scott: I can give a classic ministerial answer to that, which is that we keep all levels of funding constantly under review. That will certainly be the case as spending becomes tighter in the next spending review period. Mr McGrigor can be assured that there are no lines in my budget that will not be heavily scrutinised over the next year before the 2007 spending review. That will be one such line.

Mr McGrigor: Apart from supporting the rural community transport initiative, what else is the Executive doing to improve the accessibility of transport services specifically in rural and island areas?

Tavish Scott: The range is significant. The national concessionary travel scheme certainly has significant advantages in rural areas, as it does in urban Scotland. I have always had a difficulty with simply badging parts of Scotland as urban or rural. As we all know, Scotland is a much more geographically sophisticated place than that. People who live in Pencaitland, 20 miles outside Edinburgh, send me letters about grants for petrol stations, because they argue strongly that their area is every bit as rural as the most far-flung part of my constituency. Defining what constitutes rural Scotland is genuinely difficult. However, we work hard to ensure that the national concessionary travel scheme meets accessibility needs across Scotland, including in rural areas.

Mr McGrigor will be familiar with the moneys that we invest in lifeline ferry services on the west coast of Scotland and to the northern isles. In addition, under the national concessionary scheme, there are two free travel tickets for island residents in the Western Isles, and we are also working on air services to provide accessibility improvements through the introduction of the air discount scheme. Therefore, I would argue that considerable Government effort and resources are being applied in addition to mainstream spending on the First ScotRail franchise, the national concessionary travel scheme and so on.

Ms White: I wanted to ask about the concessionary travel scheme, and you have already touched on some of the issues that I was going to raise. You mentioned figures of £159 million to £163 million and said that the scheme would be accessible and that you would monitor it. How will you monitor the impact of the concessionary travel scheme for older and disabled people? I know that it is just newly out, but is there a timescale for monitoring it, and how will you do that?

10:30

Tavish Scott: Tom MacDonald is much more familiar with the detail than I am, but we will monitor the scheme continually, not least because there is a clear financial requirement on us to do so. In my view, we have a responsibility to Parliament to monitor the scheme continually. However, I am also interested in monitoring it from a policy point of view, by considering the gaps that we discussed earlier and asking how the scheme should be developed, if that is appropriate.

The formal budgetary position is that the scheme is a two-year scheme. As we reach the end of that period, the Government of the day will have to either take the scheme forward or adapt it and, more to the point, make budgetary provision for it. The transport minister of the day will be in a better position to assess where we are after a complete year of the scheme. I know that we will take a lot of evidence and advice from the bus industry, the regional transport partnerships and MACS and other organisations that give advice on disability and access issues.

Ms White: Thank you for that full answer.

You have mentioned other modes of transport. In 2004, the Scottish Executive identified that fewer than half of local authorities operated a taxi concession scheme. There was a lot of inconsistency and some disenchantment about that. What can the Executive do to encourage more local authorities to operate taxi concession schemes?

Tavish Scott: Again, that is a tough one. How much should central Government lay down by diktat? If it tells local authorities what to do, local authority leaders will lobby people such as you and say, “This is outrageous. Central Government is telling us what to do on every issue under the sun.” We need to separate out the statutory requirements on local authorities to commission particular services and the optional policy areas in which they might choose to place a particular requirement on taxi operators in the area.

I agree with you: in a perfect world, it would be appropriate to have a blanket, consistent position throughout Scotland. However, I do not think that that will happen because there are logical splits in responsibilities between local and central Government, according to legislative requirements.

Another matter that many councils have raised with me is how local services—including taxi services—can best be designed to meet the needs of local people with disabilities. Does that mean that every taxi must be wheelchair accessible? I know what that would mean in my part of the world: there would not be any taxis on the road because we simply could not achieve that. There will be different requirements in different parts of Scotland. Again, I trust that local authorities are best placed to make an appropriate judgment about transport for disabled people according to the principles of accessibility and availability.

Ms White: We heard evidence from people in your part of the world and others that not all taxi owners can afford to adapt their vehicles to make them wheelchair accessible. Therefore, it is all very well to have concessionary travel, but if people cannot access transport such as buses, there is no point in having it.

Tavish Scott: I agree.

Ms White: That is why I asked about encouraging different types of schemes.

You have partly answered my next question, which is about integrated services. You said that solutions should not be imposed from Edinburgh but should be local. You are not going to issue diktats and tell local authorities that they must do certain things, but does the Executive plan to encourage local authorities to provide integrated transport systems? That is why I asked earlier about the concessionary travel scheme. That scheme is paid for with taxpayers' money, but so are rural minibuses and so on. I know that you cannot give an answer on that, but perhaps the committee will take up the matter.

Can the Executive do anything to encourage local authorities to develop integrated transport schemes?

Tavish Scott: Yes. It is a fair question. There is a lot of work that should and must be done on better integration of transport systems and modes of transport. I would argue that transport interchanges need to be much more friendly for all transport users but especially for people who find travel more difficult than you and I do. That is work that we continue to do.

Yesterday, I was in Duncan McNeil's constituency discussing the Gourock interchange. That is a great project and it should be a flagship transport interchange project for Scotland because it shows exactly how to do such projects. The private and public sectors have come together through the different agencies to make the project happen and accessibility is a cornerstone of making it work.

On the other hand, in Oban, which Jamie McGrigor knows well, there is a railway station and a spanking new CalMac ferry terminal, but it is not possible to move straight from the railway platform into the ferry terminal. When the two projects were being built, Railtrack did not engage properly with CalMac, which was ridiculous. We need to do an awful lot better and regional transport partnerships can play an important role across Scotland. I look forward to helping them with guidance on best practice ideas, to which Marilyn Livingstone referred earlier.

Ms White: I was going to ask a question on regional transport facilities, but Marilyn Livingstone asked earlier what the Executive could do to ensure that accessibility considerations are included in integrated transport provision and I think that the minister answered that, so I have a question on monitoring.

How will you monitor the inclusion of equality impact assessments in regional transport plans and what action will you take to encourage such inclusion?

Tavish Scott: I guess that we must always make judgments about the kind of monitoring regime that we have in place. As we all know, from parliamentary questions, debates and so on, different tiers of government and organisations feel that central Government places a heavy responsibility on bodies to do monitoring and, as they would see it, provide an awful lot of paper. I am by no means belittling the need to ensure that such aspects are taken fully into account—we will continue to do that. Perhaps I can furnish the committee with evidence in writing on the particular monitoring mechanism that we will develop. However, we need to balance the monitoring requirement against all the other requirements, including financial requirements, that we place on regional transport bodies.

Ms White: We have heard concerns about the consultation of disabled people. To what extent were disabled people consulted on the regional transport partnerships? Were they involved in the consultation?

Tavish Scott: They would have been involved in the sense that MACS had a clear role. Before the RTPs were set up, I talked to MACS about them and about the thinking on disabled people during policy development. Of course, not only does MACS provide guidance and advice to ministers, but it can make strenuous representations if it feels that we are getting something wrong. In that sense, MACS is our body and it certainly had a role in the consultation.

Ms White: So MACS will not only consult, it will keep disabled groups informed about what is happening in the regional transport strategy.

Tavish Scott: Instead of my saying whether that is the case, you might want to ask MACS.

However, I would assume that, through the normal communications strategies that all regional transport partnerships will have, they will get out information in their local areas, which I assume everyone will see.

Ms White: So we could contact MACS to ascertain whether it is keeping people informed.

Tavish Scott: Yes. It is not for me to tell you what to do, but I think that it would be appropriate to contact MACS. You might also want to write to the chairs of the regional transport partnerships to ask for their perspective on the issue.

Ms White: Would you look to MACS to come back to you to ensure that the partnership requirements were being fulfilled?

Tavish Scott: If we got anything glaringly wrong about the way in which RTPs operate—in other words, if they did not take accessibility issues into account—I guess that I would hear about it. I would probably hear from you, if from no one else.

Ms White: That could be the case.

My final question is an all-encompassing one. What can the Executive do to ensure that there is a level playing field in accessibility in transport services across Scotland? You mentioned various things, but perhaps we can sum them up.

Tavish Scott: It would be helpful to understand what a level playing field means in that sense.

Ms White: I know that accessibility is difficult to ensure in various areas, not just in rural areas, but how can you to try to create a level playing field across Scotland so that there is no postcode lottery in accessibility?

Tavish Scott: That is a fair question. The logical way to address the issue is through the consultation on and production of the national transport strategy, the components of which relate to rail, shipping and buses. It will be appropriate for us to check our approach against the principles with which the committee is concerned, such as accessibility. I am sure that the committee and the Parliament will check how we are doing against the benchmarks that are set.

Marilyn Livingstone: My question is on the provision of information. During our consultation, disabled people have told us again and again how difficult it is to get the information that they need in a suitable format. The Scottish Executive invests in Traveline Scotland, Transport Direct and Traffic Scotland, which provide travel information. How can you ensure that the services are not only accessible to disabled people but provide suitable information to assist them to make decisions about their travel arrangements?

Tavish Scott: I would be genuinely worried if we were not doing that. If the committee's evidence suggests that we are failing in the way that Marilyn Livingstone describes, I would be concerned and I would like to see the evidence on that. The officials who run the three services that she mentioned are logical, rational and good people and I am sure that they would want to know if the services were not providing the information that people need. I am sure that websites and formulations of answers can be developed to improve the service provided.

Marilyn Livingstone: We have quite a bit of evidence on that, which we will make available.

The Convener: One of the biggest issues for disabled people is the attitude of the people who provide the service; the Executive acknowledged in its consultation document that the attitude of transport staff had been brought to its attention. What leverage does the minister have to tackle such attitudes?

Tavish Scott: We can best tackle such attitudes through, for example, the First ScotRail franchise. For example, there is an investment programme for staff training that takes such issues into account. That is one element of the negotiated franchise. To be fair, the company is well aware of the issue and we do not need to tell it that it needs to continue to work on the attitudes of its staff. I am sure that Mary Dickson, the chief executive of First ScotRail, could give you chapter and verse on what the company is doing in that regard.

It is also in the bus industry's interest to ensure that it gets this right. It does not need the bad public relations that arise from circumstances in which it does not do so. Probably, its driver training programmes could always be improved and worked on—we all have experiences that show that. However, I know that the bus companies are working hard on staff and driver training, and initiatives such as the thistle card scheme, which are demonstrably a good idea, can help in that area. Jackie Baillie's members' business debate on that a few weeks ago highlighted the issue.

We can also work with the operators of other modes of transport. The GoSkills training agency has a continuing role in assisting commercial organisations with such work.

The Convener: There are no further questions, so I thank the minister and his officials for attending. I will suspend the meeting for five minutes to allow for a changeover of witnesses.

10:44

Meeting suspended.

10:50

On resuming—

The Convener: Our next panel of witnesses will discuss issues related to information provision for disabled people. We have many questions for them. I welcome Grant Kennedy, from Direct Enquiries Ltd; Dr Gregory Burke, from DisabledGo; Stephen Harvey, from the Scottish Accessible Information Forum; and Lionel Long, from Update.

What challenges do service providers face in providing accessible information for disabled people?

Grant Kennedy (Direct Enquiries Ltd): The trouble is that a wide breadth of different types of information is needed. Until recently, the standard for the internet was not set. Lots of best practice and ideas were put forward by the Royal National Institute of the Blind, but the publicly available specification standard has come into place only recently.

Until recently there was confusion about what service providers needed to do. However, plenty of organisations, such as those that are represented at the committee today, can provide the appropriate services for service providers. A clear path is needed so that service providers know which way to turn.

Dr Gregory Burke (DisabledGo): I associate myself with those comments. As the committee heard during the previous evidence session—members were probably already well aware of the fact—disability is not a monolithic or homogeneous grouping. What is accessible for some people is not necessarily accessible for others.

Service providers face a number of key challenges, the first of which is that consulting disabled people, which is intrinsic to the ethos of DisabledGo and which we firmly encourage, brings its own challenges. Given that the disability equality duty is being introduced, we are certain to hear a lot more in the coming months about consultation fatigue.

When service providers consult disabled people, it is important that they consult a group that has a pan-disability perspective. It is not unnatural or unreasonable for groups with a specific impairment to refract reality through that conceptual lens and to view life in a certain way. In addition, a minority of disability groups are geared towards conflict. For example, a famous pub chain—I will not embarrass it by naming it—put laudable effort into making its menus available in Braille. However, towards the end of the menu, it stated, “For specials, please read the board.” That was an elementary mistake, but the chain had gone to a lot of effort to get things right. Nevertheless, the chain was castigated by local groups. We have found that working with local authority access groups tends to lead to a much more balanced approach being taken.

Finally, service providers face challenges in respect of their budgets. Service providers range from large multinationals to small businesses. A small business that needs to produce information in a variety of formats has a cost element to face. Businesses occasionally say, “I can hardly afford to produce the information in standard text, but then I have to have it in a matt finish, then in pictorial format, then in Braille, and then on tape. I can’t afford to do that, so I’ll forget all about it.” Of course, that is the wrong thing to do from the perspective of the business and of the disabled people.

The challenge for us is to help businesses to see that it is in their own interests to provide as much information as possible that is accessible and to find one or two formats that best communicate that information to the widest number of people. How many times have we picked up an easy-read leaflet in a general practitioner’s surgery, leaving the standard one behind? Rather than printing on matt and gloss, people could just print on matt, and rather than providing information in Braille, it could be put on tape. Those could be ways forward.

Lionel Long (Update): I agree with what has been said. The consultation is interesting for us, because all the research shows that, although information can be gained by consulting disabled people, the gathering of information can be achieved more readily if disabled people are involved in running disability information and advice services. It is not so much about consultation, as that word is usually understood, as about involving people in providing a service, because they understand that we are examining something that is not monolithic but multifaceted.

Mention has been made of providing information in accessible formats, and there is certainly something to be said about the costs of doing that. However, we started to provide transcription services ourselves because we could not get them anywhere else. I accept what has been said, but there can be a misconception about the cost and difficulty that are involved in providing information in accessible formats. Education is needed in that regard, because producing accessible information does not always have to be expensive.

Stephen Harvey (Scottish Accessible Information Forum): I am not sure that the challenges are particularly great. SAIF has been in existence since 1997. We have issued standards for disability information and advice provision in Scotland, distributed thousands of copies of those standards and responded to thousands of requests for those standards, along with a number of other guidance publications. I hope that there are not many public sector organisations or voluntary information and advice providers in the country that do not have those standards or some sort of guidance from us.

The private sector is a different matter. We have issued materials to the private sector as well, but it is obviously a more difficult area for us to cover. We have information on various websites, such as those of Scottish Business in the Community and of the chambers of commerce, in the hope of capturing the attention of the private sector.

The costs are not that great. If people take on board the guidance that we offer about providing accessible information generally, the requirement for other formats tends to be reduced. It is a question of continuing to try to raise awareness of the need for accessible information among service providers, and I hope that increasing attention will be paid to the fact that the law is there, and has been there since 1999, although it does not perhaps have the impact that it should have.

I differ slightly from what some of the other speakers have said, although I agree entirely with what has been said about the need for disabled people to be involved at every stage, wherever possible, not only in consultation but in the management and provision of information services. We make that key point in all our guidance. We always make it clear that people should do their utmost to involve disabled people, not only in consultation but in the management, delivery and planning of services.

The Convener: What is your experience of the level of accessibility that disabled people have to general information services, and do you feel that disabled people have enough input into the development and implementation of information services at local level? Stephen Harvey and Lionel Long both said that it is important that disabled people are involved and are listened to, but do you think that there is enough of that?

11:00

Stephen Harvey: We promote that as an essential. We are in touch with all local authorities in one way or another. Perhaps we can talk about local authorities at some point. Many local authorities—or perhaps all of them—involve disabled people in discussions on issues such as information provision. We regularly attend events at which disabled people and local authority officers and councillors discuss the issues that we are talking about today. However, I suspect that, often, that does not convert into real influence by disabled people around the planning, delivery, management and review of services. That real influence is what we promote. If it is to happen, real partnerships are required, but that is a difficult jump to make; it is difficult for local authorities and organisations of disabled people to move from a consultation process to a process in which there is partnership and power sharing.

Grant Kennedy: We deal mainly with national organisations such as the major high street banks. When they are considering their communication strategy across 1,000 or 1,500 locations, it is difficult for them to communicate directly with every local group in every local area. Apart from anything else, they have to have a corporate policy in order to do something. We work with organisations such as the Royal Association for Disability and Rehabilitation, which gets input from local organisations and disabled people across the board.

If one is to have a communication strategy, be it a national strategy or a company-based strategy, it must be used in the same way in different towns so that the results come back in the same format and people do not need to learn how to use a new information source just because they are in a different town. It is important to get input from disabled people, but we sometimes consider things too much at a local level. Disabled people want to travel as well. Direct Enquiries is a nationwide platform. We try to get input at the start, but we roll that out nationally so that things are the same wherever people go. That is why organisations must have a corporate policy.

Lionel Long: Update is a membership organisation and the majority of the voluntary sector disability information and advice services that work with us are disability led. We know that local authorities consult, but the challenge is that they normally consult the usual suspects and those small, often poorly funded, disability groups or organisations suffer from consultation fatigue. They also find it difficult to keep turning out and going to events and focus groups. The ability of those small groups to participate depends partly on energy, but also on money.

Dr Burke: The private sector faces different difficulties and challenges from those that are faced in the public sector. We produce guides to towns and cities throughout the UK, which typically cover 1,000 service providers, at least 75 per cent of which are in the private sector. Often, they are small businesses and they express surprise that information is needed in different formats. We deliver training materials, which we have written in partnership with a number of leading charities and disability organisations, to help to acclimatise them to the fact that they need to do that. When it has been explained to them—and, crucially, when it has been explained that it is in their own interests—they are quite willing to provide information in different formats, but there seems to be a massive awareness gap between the public and private sectors.

Marilyn Livingstone: Disabled consultees have suggested to us that we need a central source of information for disabled people. What are your views on that suggestion?

Lionel Long: To do that, one would need a mainframe computer bigger than this building. Sometimes we talk about information when we mean advice. Up to a point, Update, which is Scotland's national disability information service, provides a central source of information. We provide information to information providers, to avoid duplication of work. However, to expect people to use a central source of information when they seek information on employment and vocational training for disabled people, for example, would create difficulties. Most of us could not feasibly be expected to digest all the aspects of the issue if all that information was thrown at us at once. People need to know how to deal with information.

Marilyn Livingstone: It is interesting that you used the example of information on employment, because education and work form one of the strands that the committee is considering. The committee has heard significant evidence that relevant information is inadequately co-ordinated—I think you alluded to that. Disabled people said that it would be helpful if information on education courses could be co-ordinated with information on financial support and job opportunities, because the situation can be complex. Disabled people asked us how we can encourage information providers to ensure that they provide effective links to other sources of relevant information. Perhaps signposting is needed. How can a disabled person who wants to go into further education or higher education break down the barriers? Where can they access information? Those are big questions.

Grant Kennedy: Direct Enquiries is a central source of information on access and facilities. The service was developed in partnership with RADAR and the Employers Forum on Disability, which works with major organisations to help them to adopt best practice in employment. The forum has also started work with smaller businesses.

Direct Enquiries gets more than a million hits a month from people who seek information on services such as banks, from John o' Groats to Land's End. We are working with organisations such as Arthritis Care and with the Department for Transport to include additional information, most of which will provide signposting to other sources of information. Unlike Lionel Long, I think that people want a one-stop shop. He is right to say that it would be impossible to hold all that information in one place—he mentioned the size of mainframe computer that we would need. However, we can hold access information and provide signposts to experts. Often we do not know where to start when we seek information. I might start by consulting the "Yellow Pages" or yell.com, which would direct me elsewhere. Direct Enquiries provides such a service.

Lionel Long: We work in partnership with Skill Scotland, which provides a good information and advice service on FE and HE opportunities for disabled people in Scotland. If an existing or would-be student makes an inquiry to it on an issue that goes slightly beyond what it deals with, the person from Skill Scotland will deal with the inquirer, but, in this example of partnership, will ring our rights worker to talk about the educational opportunities that exist, where the person will stand with therapeutic earnings if they are a part-time student and so on. Through working in partnership, another organisation can provide the more rounded service that it has been said people are asking for. SAIF and Update have tried to get national organisations to work in such partnerships since 1999, when Update was established. We have had mixed success, but I have given an example of how things can work.

Stephen Harvey: There is clearly a need for a national organisation, or a range of national organisations, that provides signposting facilities and for organisations to work together and co-ordinate their work in certain fields. Good signposting, co-ordination and partnerships are essential if there is to be effective information and advice provision. We often do not mention advice, but advice is not the same as information.

SAIF was founded on the basis of the "Enabling Information" report, which was produced in 1995. Much of what that report said still holds. The research that I know about certainly suggests that most disabled people want information services to be provided to them locally. They still want face-to-face contact at a local level for their advice and information services. Obviously, it might not be possible to provide the particular expertise that is required in certain fields, but generally speaking, the target should be co-ordinated local information provision.

That is where local authorities come in. "Enabling Information" was clear about charging local authorities with the responsibility for co-ordinating local information services. We promote local accessible information strategies in the expectation that local authorities will organise information provision in their areas. In other words, they should bring together all the different sources of information and advice and try to ensure that they work together so that they can provide all the information and advice among them that disabled people need. That is how the process should work.

Dr Burke: I am intrigued by what has been said about access to HE and FE and would like to address that issue. I do not want to cover ground that has already been covered, but I associate myself in particular with what Grant Kennedy said about access. There is an appetite for being able to know about access from a central database. Our website, which has more than 50,000 unique users, gets 1.2 million hits a month.

Our organisations are fairly young. SAIF and Update were established in 1999, DisabledGo was established in 2000 and I think that Direct Enquiries was established in 2002. There is a profusion of information, or at least growing provision of information, and organisations' links with one another will improve as we become more established.

More information for disabled people in prospectuses and brochures is the right way forward in tackling the lack of inclusion in HE and FE. Many universities talk about targeting disabled people, but do not mention them beyond the first paragraphs of their documents, in which they mention doing so. Access to lecture halls and course information is important, of course, but when I went to university, the most important thing that I wanted to know was whether I would be able to get food—I wondered how I would manage in the refectory. I wondered whether my living accommodation would be at the back-end of nowhere or whether I would be with my peer group. That was important to me. It is a bit like Maslow's hierarchy of needs—one must ensure that one gets the basics done first before starting to talk about higher and more convoluted things.

We have talked a lot about consultation. Of course disabled people should be consulted on what should go into HE and FE prospectuses. They should be asked about what information they need. However, the wider issue is that 39 per cent of disabled people have no educational qualifications at all. Given that the equivalent figure for non-disabled people is 19 per cent, the committee might like to consider whether there is an underlying assumption about what disabled people can or cannot do.

11:15

The Convener: We have been doing that—we have been examining the aspirations of disabled people and the guidance that they receive. As part of the investigation that we have conducted up and down the country, we have taken evidence on that subject and we will make recommendations on it in our report. You are right that that is a major issue.

Stephen Harvey: We have recently done work with Borders College, which has drafted an accessible information policy. We have spoken at Glasgow School of Art and various other places. There is activity in the colleges and universities. We are talking about a big field. It is not just about courses; there are issues to do with accommodation and so on, the information on which also needs to be co-ordinated.

Marilyn Livingstone: That brings me neatly to my final question on the provision of accessible information. I asked the minister about the sharing of best practice, which is important. From the evidence of the work that you do, is there a forum for that to happen? You say that good work is being done in Borders College. How is information about that passed on to other colleges? How is best practice shared? Are we getting that right? I accept Gregory Burke's point that your organisations are young but, in your experience, is there sufficient space to allow you to share best practice?

Stephen Harvey: There could be more. We are keen to share best practice—we focus on it in our publications whenever we can to show what can be done. We certainly put information on best practice on our website and share it within the network of organisations to which we belong, but there is no facility to allow us to do that on a wider scale, which might be more effective. I am not quite sure what is required, but I think that more could be done.

Dr Burke: When it comes to best practice on accessibility, we have found over the past three or four years that there has been peer-led pressure among venues. For example, if we have surveyed about 30 restaurants in a given area by visiting them in person, we have found that when we do the annual renewals, because the information that we have gathered allows the facilities of different restaurants to be compared, disabled people naturally vote with their feet—or with whatever they have got—and go to those places where their needs will best be met and which will put them in control. When we do our annual renewals, we generally find that about 20 per cent of businesses and service providers in an area upgrade their facilities.

Perhaps that does not answer your question about the sharing of best practice, but it shows that businesses and service providers are aware of what their competitors are doing and that they seek to emulate them.

Grant Kennedy: RADAR investigated what the biggest problem was for bodies such as small businesses, colleges and schools. Part of the problem was caused by smaller, localised access groups visiting premises and perhaps being a bit overzealous in their recommendations, with the result that such bodies were so scared that they just did not do anything. We heard of small bed and breakfasts being told that they would have to provide vibrating pillows, which would have cost them £150,000, so they did not do anything.

RADAR has developed an assessment form that businesses and public sector organisations can use for free. Once an organisation has completed a simple questionnaire, it will be told what good facilities it has and what areas it should focus on. It will then be directed to the open-for-business section of the employers forum, which gives out simple advice. For example, it might suggest that staff could be trained to stack the literature on the company's shelves horizontally rather than vertically, so that it is easier to get at.

There are resources that allow people to go and see best practice, which they can then share. Information on that is available on the Direct Enquiries website. As has been said, all the relevant organisations, apart from SAIF and Update, are very new. Perhaps it is just a question of us all working more closely together to disseminate the good work that we all do and to ensure that everyone is more aware of what is available.

Lionel Long: I agree with everything that has been said. I am not sure what best practice there is among local authority information providers. I assume that there is some, although perhaps not a great deal. I do not know whether any of us has answered how well our best practice gets shared at a strategic level. SAIF and Update were involved in an event recently to encourage local authorities to take up the responsibility for adopting a strategy for accessible information. We had 16 local authority representatives in a room who did not know what one another did in that area or whether it was good or bad practice. Work could be done on that.

Ms White: Marilyn Livingstone touched on an issue that I was going to ask about when she talked of FE and HE. However, I want to expand the issue beyond FE colleges and universities. Concerns have been raised that disabled people are not seen in the advertising of service providers' products, prospectuses and that type of thing. What do you think needs to be done to put over a more strategic view to disabled people so that they can access services and information? That issue was raised with us during our evidence taking on university prospectuses. You have already partly answered my question, but do you think it would help if more disabled people were seen to be involved, for example in service providers' advertising?

Dr Burke: I feel strongly that the disabled community must have attainable role models. Stephen Hawking, who has kindly endorsed what we do, and David Blunkett are fine examples, but they are not attainable role models. We must have disabled people—there are enough of us—going to university, holding down jobs and just being everyday and run of the mill. There must be a breakout from the existing conceptualisation.

A concept in sociological history that has emerged in the past 10 to 15 years is that disabled people are not necessarily considered, a priori, as people who must be cared for but as people who have a contribution to make and a right to enjoy their community. Many people have been fighting for that attitude for a long time and it now seems to be more accepted, but it is not yet reflected in how disabled people are depicted in the general media and in the mediums that universities and others use. We cannot all be winners of 12 gold medals at the Paralympics; accepting that as a bar of success is unrealistic. It is like expecting everybody around the table to be able to run 100m in under 10 seconds; it is just not going to happen.

The Convener: Absolutely.

Dr Burke: Well, I do not know—somebody here might be able to do that.

Lionel Long: Disabled people are fighting the same battle to be seen in the media that people from ethnic minority groups had to fight; their media visibility is now taken as read. What underlies the issue is attitudes. Do we assume that 39 per cent of disabled people are unable to achieve qualifications when 19 per cent or so of non-disabled people are unable to do so? If we do, we do not bother to put a wheelchair user in a university advertisement.

In answer to Sandra White's question, more disabled people would be encouraged to consider further and higher education if disabled people were seen in university prospectuses and so on. However, a more fundamental issue prevents the powers that be from putting an advertisement with a disabled person on the cover of a prospectus.

Stephen Harvey: One of the fundamentals is employment; ultimately, not enough disabled people are employed. There is resistance among employers to employ disabled people. The percentage of disabled people who are unemployed is far greater than in the general population. More disabled people should be employed. That would help with some of the other matters that have been discussed.

The Convener: That is another strand of our inquiry.

Stephen Harvey: When we talk about profile, we begin to talk about the press and so on. Profile is much more difficult to get hold of and to have any control over. We should aim to get more people into employment. Things would lead on from that.

Dr Burke: That is true. It is right to say that the mindset of employers is laden with stereotypes about disabled people. At university, when I went to the library to get books, the librarian would talk to my book runner, even though I was at university and must have been reasonably bright. Having attainable role models and other positive images of disabled people can help to affect the general mindset, which will filter down to the grass roots.

Ms White: I could not agree more. I wonder whether that links to my question about service providers being more proactive in advertising what they have. For example, they could use disabled people to front their campaigns—perhaps they find that too expensive. What is stopping service providers proactively advertising effectively? That is another concern that has been expressed.

Grant Kennedy: Major service providers are improving. Organisations such as B&Q and the major supermarkets have gone out of their way to put in place a policy of employing disabled people. Organisations such as SCOPE have programmes that take disabled students straight from university into work placements. Much is going on, but perhaps it needs to be publicised better.

The biggest barrier to employment for disabled people in small and medium enterprises, for example, is that businesses are not aware of all the grants they can obtain, such as those to help them install computer equipment for somebody who is visually impaired or disabled. Big businesses know about that sort of thing and are doing quite a good job. If we can make clearer to smaller businesses the message that help is available for them to make alterations through physical adaptations or work aids, the number of disabled people who are employed will increase greatly.

Stephen Harvey: I agree with what has been said. When we did our promotional briefing for the private sector, we pointed out that disabled people in Scotland have an estimated £4.5 billion a year to spend. Some employers are cottoning on to the fact that disabled people have not only money to spend, but skills to offer as employees.

Service providers should do more to promote what they can provide for disabled people. Perhaps providers lack the confidence to do that. If they do not appreciate how big the market is, that needs to be pointed out to them. If service providers did more to tell people what they do, I hope that that would lead to their having more dialogue with disabled people and receiving more feedback about whether what they do is good. Through that dialogue, the provision of information, advice services and other services would improve.

That approach is the cornerstone of what SAIF suggests. Dialogue is needed. Organisations need to do what they can. They need to develop dialogue and constantly improve the services they provide. The environment is changing and new technology comes along all the time. It needs to be harnessed and used. Dialogue between service providers and disabled people provides the best way to make maximum use of what is available.

11:30

Dr Burke: I am sure that Stephen Harvey is right. When we do surveys, which are typically of 1,000 businesses and service providers in an area, businesses normally say, “We don’t want to be part of the guide. We have no disabled customers.” We say, “We think you probably do and that if you don’t you should have. How many disabled people do you think there are in the UK?” They say, “I don’t know. Half a million?” and we say, “No, it is upwards of 10 million. How much do you think disabled people spend annually in the UK?” “I don’t know; about £5 million?” We say, “No, it is upwards of £80 billion.”

The very fact that we have to provide such basic information shows that there is a massive gap in understanding and there is still a battle to be joined and won by this august body and others to educate business that it is in its own interests to do those things. That is the only way that lasting change will come about. Self-interest is the engine of change that will pull along the social carriages of justice, equality and inclusion. If businesses recognise that one in six of their prospective customers might have a disability, or that their remaining customers can influence other high-income associates, reaching disabled people will cease to be a paternalistic idea—how nice it is to be accessible for Gregory and his friends—and will become a real business imperative. Bodies with privileged positions, such as the Disability Rights Commission, have an absolute duty to get the message out.

Ms White: I was going to ask about bodies that give grants. Obviously the DRC can do it because there is legislation for it. I think it was Grant Kennedy who said that providers do not make their areas accessible because it costs money. Businesses need to know their rights and what they can claim.

I was going to turn the question on its head. In evidence, disabled people told us that they need to have easy access to information about their rights. We have mentioned websites and various other things. How do you think information can best be made available to people, some of whom clearly do not know their rights?

The Convener: That is certainly one of the big issues that have come up since the start of our inquiry. Disabled people and employers have all said the same thing.

Stephen Harvey: There needs to be a higher profile campaign of public statements and actions from places such as the Scottish Parliament about the Disability Discrimination Act 1995.

Although the DDA was enacted in 1995, its provisions have come into effect in stages. Those on information came in in 1999, but the number of people who do not know about it is amazing. Even if they do know about it, they think that it does not really matter. Sometimes, we have to point out to people—semi-humorously, because of the current climate—that some material that they have produced is not up to the mark. We ask whether they are aware of the legislation and they just shrug their shoulders and say, "We'll do it next time." As Lionel Long said, if we said the same sort of thing about other groups in society, they would be horrified that they had made such a mistake. It is unfortunate that that is where we are.

The legislation could have a higher profile and there could be more guidelines, to clarify what it means and what people should be doing with it. I can think of other legislation, such as that for housing and homelessness, that carries a welter of guidelines. Perhaps the DDA needs to build up its own body of work of that sort. I am sure that it is the lawyers who deal with legislation in private and public sector organisations. Once stuff starts to pile up on their desks and they have to advise chief executives about what they have to do to comply with legislation and the guidelines that go with it, perhaps we will see some movement and a raising of the DDA's profile.

Grant Kennedy: The problem is even more fundamental than that. We work closely with the DRC. It has told us that 33 cases have gone through what is called consultation and that out-of-court settlements have been made. That is no use to anyone. Okay, the complainant gets a bit of cash, and good luck to them, but the organisation that settles does not necessarily go back to change and improve things. No one knows about the case. Other businesses are not made aware of it.

Furthermore, although the DRC tells us that there have been 33 cases, it cannot tell us which businesses were involved. Until some proper cases go through and form case law, I cannot see anything changing.

We have put in place a facility through which users can feed back directly to business and say what is good and what is terrible. Businesses are now sharing that information with the DRC and RADAR.

It should not be left to disabled people or customers to bring a case; the local council should take it up. Let us be honest: some spurious cases are going round. For example, a lady in Bristol borrowed her friend's wheelchair and then tried to sue some shops because she could not get into them. That sort of case does nobody any favours. Local authorities should come down hard on shops. If a business does not comply with the health and safety rules, it should not be left to a member of the public to take the business to court—the local authority should do it. We need the same system for disability matters, otherwise the situation will never improve.

Lionel Long: The underlying issue is that people will not complain if they do not know what their rights are. I do not know whether we are allowed to grass people up at committees, but I will just keep going. Nationally, the DRC has done a grand job in telling service providers what their duties are under the DDA, but some people are a bit concerned that a similar amount of effort has not been put into telling members of the public, particularly disabled people, what their rights are.

Speaking to service providers or employers in their language is one thing, but service users will not complain if they do not know what their rights are. That work might not be fully within the DRC's remit, but the organisation has not expended as much energy on telling people about the DDA as it has on other aspects.

Dr Burke: I have a different take on the issue. After part III of the DDA, on access to goods and services, came into force in February 2004, a DRC survey found that 70 per cent of businesses had made no changes or adjustments whatever. The core reason for that could be the lack of compulsion, in that there is no local or national inspectorate. No law since 1867 has succeeded without that level of compulsion. The anecdotal evidence that we have from many businesses is that they simply do not know what they should be doing.

We consult and are involved with tens of thousands of disabled people every year. To give a crude generalisation—I emphasise that it is crude—many disabled people, as a result of the frictions that they encounter in trying to access their communities, have low self-esteem, a poor self-image and low expectations. The paradox is that, with the rise of the DDA, those expectations have been heightened and people think that the world will suddenly become accessible but, although some improvements have been made, the reality has largely stayed the same.

A couple of days ago, I attended a conference at which the disability equality duty for the public sector was discussed. The point was made that if organisations in the public sector do not get it right, the chief executive will go to jail. That is rubbish—it might be true in theory, but it ain't ever going to happen. The new rights for disabled people have been oversold and have not been put into context. I associate myself fully with the point that a civil case is an exhausting, debilitating and costly experience. How dare any Government say that if somebody infringes on a person's rights, it is up to that person to fund any action? That is an absolute outrage.

Mr McGrigor: You have answered my first question, which was on the DRC.

What are your views on the suggestion that local authorities should have officers with specific responsibility for disability issues? Would centralising responsibility be likely to improve information provision for disabled people?

Lionel Long: I feel strongly that it is worth a go. The majority of local authorities do not have a co-ordinating officer to which organisations such as mine and Stephen Harvey's can talk about a strategic approach to disability information. It would be a step in the right direction and it might start to answer the questions about sharing best practice that were asked earlier.

Stephen Harvey: When we talk to local authorities about local accessible information strategies, we occasionally conduct questionnaires to find out how things are going. We ask about a dozen questions to get an idea of what authorities are doing. We always ask whether someone has been put in charge of promoting and implementing the accessible information strategy. Many local authorities have said yes. The problem is that that responsibility is just one of the many that the person in charge has. We feel strongly that local authorities should have someone in charge of disability issues—a champion for disabled people.

Mr McGrigor: Someone with a title.

Stephen Harvey: Yes. Someone who co-ordinates work throughout departments. It is interesting that at Government level we have the new Office for Disability Issues, which I do not know much about. Its remit is to bring the perspective of disabled people to bear throughout Government departments. Something similar is needed in local authorities.

Grant Kennedy: I agree absolutely that that is needed. The thing that frustrates me more than anything is when we come across local authority officers who have the right job title but absolutely no authority or budget responsibilities. We have meetings with such officers who say that they would love to be able to do certain things or get others to do them, but that they cannot get to the board and cannot meet anybody. That is such a waste of money, but it is not their fault.

Having someone in charge of disability issues would help businesses, a lot of which want to do certain things, but they are not sure how to. It would help disabled people understand their rights and help councillors understand what they have to do. Such people have to have authority. Just giving someone a job title and a fancy office does not mean anything.

Dr Burke: We work with more than 45 local authorities. Building control departments are the best places in which officers can influence new builds and liaise with local groups to ensure that local disabled people are consulted when new building plans are being drawn up.

Mr McGrigor: Another issue that has been raised at nearly every consultation event that we have had with disabled people is negative attitudes to disabled people and the barrier that such attitudes can create. Given your experience, what do you think should be done to tackle negative attitudes to disabled people? I am sorry; I know that that is a huge question.

Grant Kennedy: It is. I will give you an example. A major supermarket has an event every year when a mystery shopper talks to all the staff, and every year they got top marks on the way their staff worked with disabled customers until all the staff had equality training, at which they were told what they could or could not say and do. The following year, their marks went through the floor. The trainers had scared the staff so much about saying or doing the wrong thing that staff ran the other way when a disabled customer came in.

We need to knock away a lot of the political correctness that accompanies legislation and treat people as people. There is no magic wand that we can wave, but sometimes rules and regulations on ways of dealing with people cause problems, because people who would normally just go about their business and interact with disabled people without even thinking about it start to think twice about whether "wheelchair user" is the right term and how they are supposed to deal with someone who is visually impaired. Sometimes they just walk the other way.

11:45

Dr Burke: It is refreshing to hear that, as PC language can be a barrier to inclusion, yet some disability organisations are absolutely obsessed with it. You can call me a disabled person, disabled, handicapped or an invalid, if you must, but what I am really bothered about is whether I have access to education and health care and whether I can get to the toilet if I need to use it. That is what is important to me.

User-led disability equality training that is done by reputable bodies is always a good way forward. In the public sector, a system of policies, procedures and practices to reward good behaviour and recognise inclusivity could help. In the private sector, there is the corporate social responsibility agenda and the CSR index, which was published in *The Sunday Times* last week, although there was little mention of disability in it. Those are ways of encouraging better attitudes.

Ms White asked us to consider role models. The projection of disabled people in society will help to break down underlying assumptions. Let us not kid ourselves—those assumptions have been with us since the dawn of time. Disabled people have always been considered third, fourth or fifth-class citizens. It is only now, after a lot of hard work by preceding generations, that we are starting to break the barriers down.

Stephen Harvey: I think that the terminology is important. It is a road that we move along, and we hope that we are moving from bad things to better things, and from there on to still better things. That is done through conducting consultation with disabled people and getting feedback from them about what terminology they would like to be used.

There may be bad examples of disability awareness training, but disability awareness training is important. I hope that all service providers will encourage good disability awareness training in their organisations. Most people do not know instinctively how to interact with disabled people or others who are different from them. Some people are good at interacting with wheelchair users, but they are not so good at interacting with someone with a learning disability who presents challenges. Those are issues that disability awareness training can address. It is an educational process that is good for everybody who works in a service industry.

Grant Kennedy: I would not disagree with that. However, when I first got involved in equality training, I went home and said to my father, "By the way, dad, you're a wheelchair user." He replied, "That makes me sound as though I'm a drug user. Who decided that I should be called a wheelchair user?" I am not knocking equality training; I am saying that it is about getting the right message out to everybody.

Someone might have been working at the same supermarket, pub or restaurant for 10 years and dealing with a disabled customer for all that time. Then, all of a sudden, they start treating the customer differently. That will have an adverse effect. My father goes to a local pub where the landlord takes the mickey out of him every day. If he ever went in there and that did not happen, he would wonder why—but anyone who had done equality training would not dare do that.

Dr Burke: Progress is measured when these things are not even considered—when my name is Gregory and I am the chief executive of DisabledGo, and that is it.

Lionel Long: Attitude is an essential aspect of accessibility. Everything can be in place to enable physical accessibility, but if a service is not accessible because of attitudes, the customer might, like any other customer, use it once, but never use it again. I agree with Stephen Harvey that equality training or disability awareness training is an essential aspect of that.

Attitudes to things such as the DDA are influenced by the lawyers and consultants who promote a negative attitude towards disabled people by adopting the stick approach to implementation of the DDA instead of being more positive about disabled people and saying, "These are customers, not people who are going to land you up in court." Such attitudes do not help to improve things.

Stephen Harvey: We often forget that attitudes are bad because confidence is lacking. Through good training, confidence can be gained and the attitude issue can be sorted out.

Dr Burke: The best disability equality training that I have come across has generally been user led. Such training tends to be more balanced.

Marilyn Livingstone: I want to ask some questions about accessible formats. What problems are associated with the provision of information in accessible formats? What do we need to do to improve the availability of accessible formats?

Lionel Long: One of the problems is supply. There is a poor supply of transcription services in Scotland. Much of the work is carried out by national organisations such as the RNIB, using volunteers. However, because it can take five or six weeks to get something done, we undertake our own transcription. Some things can be done more quickly. We live in an electronic age, and a document can be whizzed from Edinburgh down to Bristol, Brailled and returned the next day. However, that is usually done by private sector organisations and it is quite a bit more expensive.

There is a misconception among service providers that accessible formats cost a fortune and that they will have to order 1,000 copies in Braille of every leaflet that they publish. Nowadays, that is not necessary.

Another supply issue is that there are only about 80 BSL interpreters in Scotland.

Grant Kennedy: I agree that it is more difficult to get accessible formats in Scotland. We carried out assessments of organisations such as Abbey and were told, "When you phone our branches, don't ask how many sign language interpreters we have. We don't have any." However, we forgot to tell our customer relations team not to do that and, as it turned out, 35 per cent of those branches had sign language interpreters—people who had a daughter, friend or husband who was deaf and who were able to provide that service. It is probably correct to say that there are only about 80 trained sign language interpreters in Scotland, but there are probably more people than we think in Scotland who know sign language.

Boots asked us to do a trial for it. We set up a call centre to deal with requests for alternative formats for any of its malaria leaflets and leaflets about going on holiday. On the bottom of every leaflet, in big print, a number was given that people had to ring to get alternative formats. We arranged with the RNIB to have Braille copies, audiotapes and everything else available. The trial lasted for a year and in that year there were 55 requests, only four of which were for Braille copies. Boots is keeping that helpline going, but that just goes to show that the fear of having to provide an alternative format is disproportionate to the need for it. Through good communication with their customers, companies can sometimes get around a lot of the issues that make alternative formats necessary.

The Convener: If people do not know that information is available in alternative formats, they will not ask for them.

Grant Kennedy: No, but it is a matter of stating that in large print or ensuring that it is part of customer service to ask people whether they need more help.

Lionel Long: There should be an assumption that people are able to get the information in the format of their choice.

The Convener: Yes.

Dr Burke: That takes us back to what we said at the beginning of the debate. It might not be necessary to have information available in a range of formats if the most accessible format for everybody is used in the first place. Rather than having eight or nine different formats, it may be necessary to have only one or two.

Lionel Long mentioned the poor supply of transcription services. If we are successful in encouraging businesses and service providers to put information into accessible formats—as we hope we will be—the constriction of the supply of transcription services, which might not necessarily be expensive at the moment, means that the higher demand for those services will inevitably lead to higher prices.

Secondly, many businesses and service providers are simply unaware of where to go for transcription services. However, that is not at all a criticism of transcriptions services because there could be a lack of budgets to market them effectively or the demand for them may be so high that there is no need to market them.

Stephen Harvey: SAIF and Update produce a guide to transcription services in Scotland, the second edition of which is out this month. Some 3,500 to 4,000 copies of the guide will be widely distributed, although more may be distributed if there is demand for them. We need to increase the awareness of service providers in general that there are people out there who can provide transcription services.

We also need to increase awareness that people must get organised. Service providers must decide what is important for them to do and then organise people to make it happen. We have clearly set out in a set of guidelines how that can be done—I know that we appear to have guidelines for everything, but we do. Costs are a feature—the work cannot be done for nothing—but they are quite small. As Lionel Long said, people are afraid of the costs, but in fact the costs are not a major issue. People must develop a realistic view of the likely demand for formats and organise themselves to deliver things. There is a shortage of BSL interpreters, for example, which is a different issue that we need to tackle, but if we can increase awareness and the demand for services, supply will—I hope—increase. I am not convinced that doing so will mean that costs will increase because I hope that more demand will result in there being more suppliers to meet that demand.

Lionel Long: There is a marvellous opportunity for social enterprise firms. Such opportunities do not need to be taken on by the commercial sector.

Stephen Harvey: If businesses use larger type-faces and the appropriate paper and generally produce accessible information, it will be found that the demand for certain formats will be less than it otherwise would be. I think that that was said earlier.

Dr Burke: That is exactly right.

Stephen Harvey: I now hate any type-face that is less than 14-point size—indeed, I almost refuse to read it.

Marilyn Livingstone: On access to information, I have a question about the internet. Do we rely too much on the internet and expect too many people to have access to and knowledge of the relevant technology?

Stephen Harvey: There is a balance to be struck. The internet and advances in information technology have been a fantastic benefit for many disabled people. There is no question about the benefits that they have brought in making information accessible. I am not an expert in the field and am sure that there are people here who can say much more about such things than I can, but I can say that the technology represents a tremendous step forward. However, it is clear that some people will be unable to access the internet, so we must ensure that we do not overuse it or put all our eggs in one basket, although I do not think that there is any evidence that that is happening at the moment. We must maximise our use of the internet because it has been an enormous benefit to many people.

Grant Kennedy: I agree 100 per cent. The internet is probably the medium that can most easily be made accessible to everybody. There can be audio files and downloads—wonderful and fantastic things can be done on it—but, more important, information on it can be updated daily. An access guide that is printed on paper will be out of date before the ink is dry, which is often a problem, but the internet can be updated daily. I think that it is also the fastest-growing medium.

We can probably focus more on the internet, but we should not use it in isolation. I run an internet company, but I still pick up the phone to make orders, which I do not do online. I look at things on the internet, but order them on the phone because doing so has been ground into me. There is still a need for a combination of sources of information, which is why we are putting in place a telephone service.

The internet is great, but until recently there was confusion about standards. Everyone waxed lyrical about the Bobby standard, but the RNIB website failed the Bobby test. The RNIB developed the see it right standard, but when we put the RNIB on our site last year I was astounded to learn that only 47 companies are RNIB accredited because they have achieved the standard. Luckily, around three months ago, BSI British Standards brought out a publicly available specification—PAS 78. All the standards that I mentioned work on the same system, but in this country we should be better at developing standards quickly. Disability discrimination legislation required websites to be accessible more than a year ago, although standards had not been set.

12:00

Lionel Long: A balance needs to be struck. We provide information on what makes an accessible and comprehensive website, but the website is just one source of information and we also provide information on paper and CD-ROM. The BBC relies heavily on the internet for the provision of information on its business, but there should be a more balanced approach—that is a hobby horse of mine.

Dr Burke: DisabledGo could not exist without the internet. When we survey towns and cities, we provide information to a depth and breadth never attempted in the past. If we produced the information in hard copy, we would be publishing the equivalent of two editions of "Yellow Pages" per guide. People would not be able to lift the document.

Members are right to flag up access to the internet. A benefit of the internet is its anonymity, but that is also a weakness, because it is difficult to track use. However, the statistics that are available give encouraging indications of the internet's use by disabled people. Some 47 per cent of members of the Disabled Living Foundation and 60 per cent of members of the Spinal Injuries Association go online every day. However, because disability is so multifaceted, some disabled people find it very difficult to use the internet, even with the help of speech browsers and tools such as JAWS. Recent research suggests that around 90 per cent of visually impaired people do not have daily access to the internet—I am sorry, but I do not have the exact figure. That is why we will bring out an automated telephone service next month.

It would be wrong to regard any technology as a cure-all, but we should embrace technology, which has historically been a friend to disabled people.

Stephen Harvey: A few years ago, we produced a guide to making websites accessible and sent it out through the normal channels. There was quite a lot of demand for the guide from web designers. I have no evidence on the matter, but my impression is that during the past three or four years there has been an increase in website designers' awareness of accessibility issues.

Ms White: Can we do more to make websites accessible to disabled people?

Stephen Harvey: Yes. We produce guides about how to make websites accessible, as do other organisations. I have limited knowledge of the matter, but I know that it is not particularly difficult to make a site accessible. Often, people simply have to compromise on their fancy design ideas. I do not know where the people who design websites are trained, but perhaps more training on accessibility could be offered.

Grant Kennedy: There is a plethora of people who can design accessible websites, but companies have to want such a website. I think that the RNIB's most recent statistics on the matter show that fewer than 25 per cent of websites in the United Kingdom are accessible, which is disgusting when we consider that it is not difficult to make a website accessible. There are young guys out there fresh out of college who can design a website and who will not charge an arm and a leg to do it. I do not think that we have to get more people trained because there are lots of people out there who can do it. The focus has to be on telling companies that they must do it, not just that they should do it.

Dr Burke: Perhaps companies should be told that it is in their own interests to make their website accessible. That is the key. If it is easier for me to order a book or get information from a website, that company is going to benefit. If the company does not make its website accessible, it is cutting itself off from an enormous consumer group. It is in businesses' own interests to do it; that is the key way to drive change.

Ms White: Is there enough capacity in Scotland to deliver the alternative formats? Grant Kennedy said that someone who has just graduated can set up such websites; is there enough IT capacity in Scotland?

Grant Kennedy: I do not know the specifics, but I will take a wild guess and say absolutely. My 10-year-old niece can use a computer. Most people who have any kind of IT training can do it and there are many people out there who have hypertext markup language skills who can do it. It would be very easy to find out what the capacity is in Scotland by advertising; I imagine there would be a plethora of responses.

Stephen Harvey: We need to build in website accessibility at an earlier stage of the process—just as we need to do for general information provision. SAIF gets queries from lots of information providers who work for local authorities and are interested in accessibility issues. It would have been nice if they had learned all about accessibility when they were being trained to be information providers.

Dr Burke: There is a common theme whether we are talking about information, access to buildings or access to websites. If providers start off with the right fundamental premise—inclusivity for everyone—and listen to the key stakeholders, who will include disabled people, they will be sure that they are providing a service that meets people's needs. One of the reasons for DisabledGo's success is that we talk and listen to the community. We deliver what people want. We do not do all the work and then ask them what they think of it; that would be entirely the wrong way round.

Ms White: I have a question about BSL. Someone mentioned that there are 80 interpreters in Scotland; someone said last week that there are 40, but 80 is probably nearer the mark. There is obviously limited provision of face-to-face BSL services. Is enough being done to ensure that sufficient alternatives are available, such as BSL video links, text services, and staff trained to a sufficient level of BSL? It takes so many years to train BSL signers and we do not have enough of them.

Stephen Harvey: I would like some research to be done into what is an ideal target figure for BSL interpreters, what uses they have and how often they are used. It would be nice to have a target figure to aim at. For years, everyone has been saying that there are not enough and that there is a terrible shortage, but no one has said to me how much of a shortage there is. It would be good to know that. I do not think that there is really an alternative. BSL video and text services are substitutes, but their uses are limited. We need to have BSL interpreters, but I do not know how many.

Lionel Long: There are some examples of alternatives here in Edinburgh and the Lothians. A number of the staff in the City of Edinburgh Council's equalities unit are undertaking BSL training so that they will be able to work at a basic level with service users who come through the door. I was also talking to someone from Lothian and Borders police who said that they are doing the same. The council and the police force are putting some key staff through BSL training courses as an alternative to trying to get someone to come along to the council office or the police station at short notice, which just does not happen. If we could all communicate in BSL, that would be the answer but, as someone who has done a basic course, I know that one of the problems is keeping it up. If you do not use it, you lose it.

Stephen Harvey: There is a children's television programme on CBBC on which there is a chap who signs all the time. Has anyone seen it?

Dr Burke: It is past my bedtime, I am afraid.

Stephen Harvey: It is not a programme specifically for people who need sign language; he just does it all the time. I have a three-year-old grandchild who often talks to me and makes the signs. If everyone did that, it would be amazing.

Dr Burke: On the way to the committee, I read a report by Action Disability Kensington and Chelsea. The report said that around 60 per cent of people with hearing impairments in that borough found that their primary point of health care was inaccessible to them. There is huge demand for BSL interpretation. The issue overlaps with what was said earlier about attitudes and behaviour. If we can incentivise organisations to address their policies and practices and reward good behaviour, we might be able to get them to consider BSL training.

Ms White: Staff in the Parliament are being offered training in BSL. However, I want to ask about the alternatives. I raised the matter a couple of weeks ago in the context of video links and that type of thing. There is a pilot project in London at the moment, which has been successful, and I have asked the Executive to consider starting such a project here. Do you think that we need more BSL interpreters, or could video links provide an alternative? The project that I saw enables someone up in Stornoway and the islands to phone up and get video linked to the signing—the interpreter does not need to move physically but is available to people wherever they are in the country.

Lionel Long: That is an increasingly common method of communication for people with hearing impairments. They can go through RNID Typetalk and various other things and get an online, real-time interpreter. I imagine that video linking would reduce the problem considerably, especially given the geography of Scotland.

Dr Burke: Faced with the alternative, that would surely be a way forward, but nothing beats human contact. Most people would prefer to deal with someone face to face rather than over the phone, regardless of whether they have an impairment. If we are seriously trying to create an inclusive society, we must ensure that provision is made on an equal opportunities basis.

Stephen Harvey: Such projects are also reliant on technology. As we said earlier, great advances can be made through technology, but if someone does not have access to the technology, whatever business or service is being provided—

Ms White: It comes through the television screen via a small box.

Dr Burke: It is massively better than having no provision at all.

Mr McGrigor: Do you think that enough training is provided to information providers in understanding the need for alternative formats and the range of formats that might be needed?

Grant Kennedy: Are you talking about training for service providers?

Mr McGrigor: Yes.

Grant Kennedy: Many public and private sector organisations offer training to service providers. There is no lack of training opportunities, but there is a lack of wanting that training among service providers. I do not think that a huge amount of training is involved in giving people advice on the alternative formats that they can use; it is a matter of whether the service providers are willing to take up that training. If they want to do it, it is quick and easy to get such training in place; two Scottish organisations that can do that are represented here. There is no lack of people to do the training, but there is a lack of will.

Stephen Harvey: Disability awareness training is one aspect of it and training about the mechanics of providing information in alternative formats is another. The training is out there; people just need to ask for it. It is advice and guidance about the mechanics of it that people need. I repeat what I said earlier: I just wish that people undertook such training earlier in the process, when they are learning to be information providers.

12:15

Mr McGrigor: Do you expect the forthcoming disability equality duty to have a significant impact on the provision of suitable, relevant and accessible information?

Stephen Harvey: I hope so. This year we are running seminars for policy makers and training for practitioners in local authorities. The fact that all the events that we have organised so far have been oversubscribed is largely a result of the disability equality duty—that is certainly the feedback that we have had from the people who have attended them. I am glad that the duty is causing people in local authorities to focus their attention.

Mr McGrigor: Good.

Dr Burke: We work with many local authorities and, in my experience, their employees are scrupulously fair and, in general, want to do the right things. If the disability equality obligation is laid down in law, they will do their very best to abide by it.

I come back to the idea that if we want to engender the right behaviour, we must set up the right system of rewards. What will the rewards be for people who get things right? How will that be recognised? If we take human achievement on an individual level, most people want to make a contribution and have it acknowledged. I suggest that the same is true on a corporate level. That is why I think that a system of rewards is extremely important.

The Convener: My next question is for SAIF. You have produced and published “Standards for disability information and advice provision in Scotland” and a guide to barrier-free information. How do you monitor the uptake of that guidance and what can be done to improve its uptake?

Stephen Harvey: We monitor the uptake of the guidance with difficulty. We have probably distributed about 4,500 copies of our standards and about 1,500 copies of our publication on barrier-free information, which targets local authorities and other large public sector organisations. Given that those are only two of our publications, a significant number of them have been sent out.

We distribute through our database, which has about 1,000 organisations on it, and we respond to any requests that we get at the events that we attend. That is how our distribution works. As far as monitoring is concerned, I think I have mentioned that we issue a questionnaire to local authorities and to anyone who takes a copy of our standards. We ask them a series of questions to find out how they are getting on with implementing the standards or local information strategies and what steps they have taken, and we offer them further support, assistance or advice, if they have a particular requirement.

In 2003, an independent evaluation was done, which concluded that the standards had been partly implemented by 47 per cent of respondents and fully implemented by 12 per cent of them. That was okay. To be honest, because we are an organisation that has a budget of £80,000 a year and one employee—of whom I am half—it is quite difficult for us to do a thorough job of measuring the uptake and impact of our publications. I have described the steps that we take. If we were to take more comprehensive action, we would need more resources.

The Convener: We have asked many questions. We are taking evidence that will form part of a report that will make a number of recommendations. If there is anything that we have not asked members of the panel about that they think we should know about, or anything that they would like to tell us about their organisations or the issues that we have covered this morning, I invite them to do so now. It is not compulsory to respond; I asked just in case anything had been left out. No one has anything to add, so I thank the witnesses for the evidence that they have given.

Meeting closed at 12:19.

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