

EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE

Tuesday 16 January 2007

Session 2

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EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE

1st Meeting 2007, Session 2

CONVENER

*Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Margaret Smith (Edinburgh West) (LD)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Marlyn Glen (North East Scotland) (Lab)

*Carolyn Leckie (Central Scotland) (SSP)

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)

Frances Curran (Central Scotland) (SSP)

Linda Fabiani (Central Scotland) (SNP)

Mrs Nanette Milne (North East Scotland) (Con)

*attended

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 16 January 2007

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 10:32*]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Cathy Peattie): Good morning, and apologies for the late start to the meeting. This is the first meeting in 2007 of the Equal Opportunities Committee. I remind all those present, including members, that mobile phones and BlackBerrys should be turned off completely because they interfere with the sound system, even when they are switched to silent. I have received apologies from John Swinburne and Marilyn Livingstone. Sandra White will join us shortly.

Under agenda item 1, we must decide whether to take in private item 4, which is consideration of an approach paper on the Prostitution (Public Places) (Scotland) Bill, and to take the item in private at our next meeting. Is that agreed?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Gypsy Travellers

10:33

The Convener: Agenda item 2 is consideration of the committee's review of progress on Gypsy Travellers. The paper that is before us aims to bring the committee up to date on the subject and sets out an approach for the production of a final report.

I am concerned about the timescale. In undertaking a review, we were clear that we wanted to have the report of the Executive's short-life strategic group on Gypsy Travellers by the end of last year. We want to be able to produce our report. We could flag up issues in our legacy paper, but we owe it to the Gypsy Travellers in Scotland to ensure that we are monitoring the recommendations that the committee produced in its original report.

Elaine Smith (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab): I agree with the convener on that. Obviously, we cannot dictate what any future committee will do. However, we should impress on our successor committee the high expectations on the issue. In the first session of the Parliament, the Equal Opportunities Committee undertook an extensive inquiry and produced a report. There is a lot of disappointment that things have not moved on as quickly as they should have done. We need to impress on our successor committee that the issue should take precedence in the new session and should be considered with some urgency.

The Convener: Absolutely.

Carolyn Leckie (Central Scotland) (SSP): I agree. Is there any chance that we could amend the timescale and exert a wee bit more pressure on the Executive to come forward with a response? It might not be realistic to assume that it will do that, but I am concerned that, with the Minister for Communities changing, the subject will be lost and the wheel will need to be reinvented. We should impress upon the new minister that the matter is important.

The Convener: You are right. We will have the minister before us on 20 February and we will have the report by then.

Marlyn Glen (North East Scotland) (Lab): For clarity, will we have the final report by then? Is the draft report now the final report? If so, has it been made public?

The Convener: We will have the report and we will be able to question the minister on how the Executive responds to the issues that we have raised. We will need to finalise our report by March.

Marlyn Glen: Has the strategic group's report been made public?

The Convener: It will be made public before our meeting with the minister on 20 February. It will be included with the papers for the meeting.

Marlyn Glen: I refer to paragraph 9 in paper EO.S2.07.01.01, which reads as if we could decide to make the report public.

The Convener: I understand that the minister agreed that the report should be made public before our meeting so that we can discuss it. Given that the report was written because we asked for it, it seems reasonable that we should have access to it as soon as possible.

Ms Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP): I apologise for being late. I know that everyone was late because of transport problems.

Like others, I am concerned about the timescale. The previous Equal Opportunities Committee's report on Gypsy Travellers was published in 2001, which is more than five years ago. My big concern is that we will not have the minister's response before the end of the session. Can we speed up the timetable so that we get the minister's response and can finalise our report?

The Convener: We will be able to do that. I would have liked to have the minister's response a month ago, to be honest, but we will have the report before 20 February and we will be able to question the minister on that day. We will then be able to respond to the report and publish our own report and recommendations.

Elaine Smith is right—we will include the matter in our legacy paper and we hope that our successor committee will take it up. I remind members that the initial report was done not by us but by the Equal Opportunities Committee in the first session of Parliament, albeit that some of us were members of that committee.

Ms White: I understand that. I am glad that we will be able to respond. My worry was that the minister would not respond. I do not know what our recommendations will be, but in our legacy paper we should recommend that the minister should respond to the report.

The Convener: Do members agree to the approach that is proposed in the paper?

Members indicated agreement.

Petition

Proposed Scottish Disability Community Development Council (PE1017)

10:38

The Convener: Agenda item 3 is petition PE1017, by William Wilson, who calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Executive to establish a Scottish disability community development council. Paper EO.S2.07.01.02 highlights the fact that, when the petitioner submitted his petition, he was unaware of the extensive work that the Equal Opportunities Committee had done on its recently completed inquiry. Many of the issues that he raises in the petition are covered in our report.

Do members agree to the recommendations in the paper?

Elaine Smith: The petitioner raises important issues, but, as you say, they are addressed in our report, which is the result of more than two years' work by the committee. I agree with the recommendations, but I would be interested to know the petitioner's thoughts on our report. We should direct him to our report, but it would be interesting to get some feedback from him and find out whether he thinks that there is anything that has not been addressed.

The Convener: Do you suggest that we write to the petitioner?

Elaine Smith: If we refer the petitioner to the committee's report and the *Official Report*, we should ask for his thoughts on our work, as he does not seem to have known about it.

Ms White: As the member of the Public Petitions Committee who recommended that the petition be forwarded to this committee, I think that it might be my fault, as it were, that we are considering the petition. Certainly, the petitioner was pleased that we had published a report on the issue and he attended the debate in the chamber on 20 December, as we suggested he should do. I agree that we should send him a copy of our report "Removing Barriers and Creating Opportunities".

The petition raises the issue of support. In light of the tragic incident of the young girl working in Morrisons in Paisley who lost a leg and an arm after throwing herself under a subway train because she was being bullied and was not being supported, I suggest that it would be a good idea to forward the petition to the cross-party group, which I think is conducting an inquiry into support for disabled people. On Friday, the cross-party group had a meeting with disability groups and a

small group from the Executive to discuss how to get people back into employment and how to provide support. Unfortunately, I cannot remember the full name of the cross-party group—I am sure that the clerks will know—but perhaps we could send it a copy of the petition.

The Convener: I understand that the Public Petitions Committee has already agreed to refer the petition to the cross-party group on disability, so we can assume that that has been done. However, Sandra White's point about the need for support is well made.

Ms White: I just want to emphasise that people who are in employment do not get the support that they should get. That should be highlighted. I thank the petitioner for lodging the petition. Our report has addressed many of the issues, but the petition should also be passed to the cross-party group on disability.

The Convener: From the evidence that we took, it was certainly clear that there is a real need for increased support to help disabled people to get into work.

Carolyn Leckie: I agree with much of what has been said, but I want to point out that, as a matter of courtesy, we should not assume that our disability inquiry dealt with the issues that the petitioner has raised. We need some feedback from the petitioner on whether he thinks that his concerns have been addressed. Before we formally close the petition, we should give the petitioner an opportunity to respond.

The Convener: That makes sense. We also need to receive formal feedback from the Executive in the form of recommendations.

Margaret Smith (Edinburgh West) (LD): We should accept recommendations a and b in paragraph 8 of the clerk's paper but, at this point, we should not accept recommendation c. As Carolyn Leckie said, it is reasonable for us to think that our report tackles many of the petitioner's concerns but we should not assume that all his concerns have been dealt with. We should refer him to our report and to the debate that we had in the chamber—given the time remaining, we should probably do that with some urgency—but we should reserve our position on recommendation c until we hear back from the petitioner.

The Convener: We will write to, or otherwise contact, the petitioner to ask for his feedback. Is that agreed?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: We move into private session to discuss an approach paper.

10:43

Meeting continued in private until 11:22.

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