

# **EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE**

Tuesday 20 March 2007

Session 2

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## EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE

### 6<sup>th</sup> Meeting 2007, Session 2

#### CONVENER

\*Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab)

#### DEPUTY CONVENER

Margaret Smith (Edinburgh West) (LD)

#### COMMITTEE MEMBERS

\*Marilyn Glen (North East Scotland) (Lab)

Carolyn Leckie (Central Scotland) (SSP)

\*Marilyn Livingstone (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)

\*Mr Jamie Mc Grigor (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

#### THE FOLLOWING GAVE EVIDENCE:

Rhona Brankin (Minister for Communities)

Fiona Hird (Scottish Executive Development Department)

Yvonne Strachan (Scottish Executive Development Department)

Hilary Third (Scottish Executive Development Department)

#### CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Steve Farrell

#### SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

Zoé Tough

#### ASSISTANT CLERK

Roy McMahon

#### LOCATION

Committee Room 2



## Scottish Parliament

### Equal Opportunities Committee

*Tuesday 20 March 2007*

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 10:01*]

### Decision on Taking Business in Private

**The Convener (Cathy Peattie):** Good morning. I open the sixth meeting of the Equal Opportunities Committee in 2007. This is our last meeting this session.

I remind all those present, including members, that mobile phones and BlackBerrys should be turned off completely as they interfere with the sound system even when they are switched to silent. I have received apologies from Carolyn Leckie, Margaret Smith and Sandra White. Elaine Smith is running late, but we expect her soon.

Agenda item 1 is to consider whether to take item 6, on our draft annual report, and item 7, on our draft report on our review of equalities in Scotland, in private. Is that agreed?

**Members** *indicated agreement.*

## Disability Inquiry

10:02

**The Convener:** Agenda item 2 is the Scottish Executive's response to the committee's report on its disability inquiry. I am pleased to welcome Rhona Brankin MSP, who is the Minister for Communities, and Yvonne Strachan and Hilary Third, who are from the Executive's equality unit.

I invite the minister to make opening remarks before we move to questions from members.

**The Minister for Communities (Rhona Brankin):** I thank the committee for inviting me to give evidence. I share the committee's interest in, concerns about and commitment to the issue.

The disability inquiry that the committee undertook was undoubtedly one of the most substantial pieces of work undertaken by the Parliament. The Executive warmly welcomes the report and its findings. We very much support its focus on removing barriers and creating opportunities for disabled people. Both the Parliament and the Executive have a long-standing commitment to disability equality.

We certainly agree that people with disability should have the opportunity and the choice to play an active role in Scottish society, to improve their quality of life and to be respected and included as equal members of Scottish society. We take the view that the committee's report will help us to focus our efforts to deliver those objectives. The report was published at about the same time as the report of the Executive's disability working group. Together, those developments provide a context for our work to promote equality and to establish a direction for future action. The disability equality duty was introduced at the end of 2006. It provides a strong lever for change across the public sector and it will help to ensure that disability equality is embedded in every aspect of the work of public authorities.

The Disability Rights Commission's disability agenda, which was launched in February, provides further momentum with its vision of a society in which all disabled people can participate fully as equal citizens. I am sure that the committee supports that vision—we certainly do. However, to deliver that vision, we must tackle the barriers that exist across a wide range of policy areas, including those that the committee's report highlights. There are barriers in relation to employment, further and higher education, leisure, transport and cross-cutting issues such as physical access and access to information. There is a huge amount to do to realise our goals for disability equality, but the pace of change is increasing. Certainly, the committee's report will

help us to focus our work to shift the disadvantage, discrimination and inequality that disabled people still experience. I look forward both to taking part in this morning's discussions and to working with future committees on this agenda.

**Marlyn Glen (North East Scotland) (Lab):** I think that we have shared values and a shared vision on the agenda, and I am glad to hear you talk about the increasing pace of change. However, can I push you a little on the priority? Recommendation 4 of the report asks that a task force be established to advance the independent living agenda in Scotland and that the work be monitored by the Scottish ministers. The committee is extremely disappointed by the Scottish Executive's response, which is to say that it will consider what mechanisms are required to support independent living. The committee considers that such a response amounts to a clear lack of policy direction in this vital area, especially when the DRC and others have said that a Scottish task force is required. What assurances can the minister give that the Executive's work in this area will be given priority and that there will be the full and direct involvement of disabled people?

**Rhona Brankin:** First, we have not said that we will not establish a task force; it is a matter of timing. This is clearly a priority area for the Executive and for the United Kingdom Government. Discussions are taking place with the UK Government and we want to consider the best way to take the matter forward. Yvonne Strachan or Hilary Third might like to talk about the discussions that have been held with the UK Government. In the broadest terms, I can say that we understand that this is fundamental to work going forward and that it is an area of work on which we will continue to liaise. At a later date, we can come back to the committee and describe our approach in more detail. Would that be okay, convener?

**The Convener:** Yes.

**Yvonne Strachan: (Scottish Executive Development Department):** As the minister has indicated, we have an on-going dialogue with the UK Government through, in particular, the Office for Disability Issues. The focus on independent living has been very much part of the office's activities, and that focus is also recognised in Scotland through the two reports to which the minister has referred. We are considering which aspects of the Prime Minister's strategy unit's report and the Prime Minister's direction on disability might be taken forward in Scotland. It is necessary to look at the matter in the context of the work that both the committee and the Executive's working group have done to decide what is the most appropriate mechanism for taking

forward the activities and work around independent living. That is certainly not an indication that there is no focus on or commitment to taking the work forward.

**Rhona Brankin:** One of the issues that we need to discuss with the UK Government is the fact that we have a system for direct payments in Scotland that is slightly different from the system that the Government is looking to have down there. There are areas in which we need to scope out the work—that is already going forward. The commitment is there to do the work. We will certainly examine the possibility of setting up a task force, but the engagement and involvement of disabled people in the work going forward are central.

**Marlyn Glen:** Thank you. You are not saying that there will not be a task force and you might come back to the committee on the matter.

**Rhona Brankin:** That is right. The final decision has not yet been taken.

**The Convener:** Issues to do with access to work were a major part of our inquiry. A high number of disabled people who are not in work would like to have the opportunity to gain employment. Recommendation 9 of the committee's report asked the Executive to actively encourage disabled people to enter the job market and to promote their doing so, but the Executive's response merely names existing initiatives, which the committee was told in evidence were not working for disabled people. Can the Executive refine its initiatives or do further work to encourage disabled people to enter the labour market?

**Rhona Brankin:** I want to say a little about "Workforce Plus: an Employability Framework for Scotland", which is a Scotland-wide system of developing employability. In addition to that, there are UK Government programmes such as the new deal for disabled people and the workstep and work preparation programmes.

Through workforce plus, we are targeting seven areas that face the highest employment deprivation. We want to ensure that we provide opportunities for people with disabilities and monitor what happens to them. That work sits with the work that you have identified needs to be done to ensure that careers options are available to disabled people and that support is offered to them once they are in employment. The work that is being done through workforce plus forms part of a continuum.

We have sought to encourage funders at the local level to review the funding streams, to move away from short-term contracts and to foster stronger working relationships between organisations on the ground. Through the workforce plus national partnership board, the

members of which include the Executive, Jobcentre Plus, the enterprise networks and the Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council, the local funding partnerships will be encouraged to give feedback on how national funding streams should change.

Workforce plus is one of our main vehicles for ensuring that we support mechanisms for disabled people to gain employment, but we need to ensure that a strategic and co-ordinated approach is adopted. We very much take on board the fact that long-term funding is an issue. Indeed, concerns about short-term funding were raised in a recent independent review of the welfare to work scheme that was commissioned by the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, which I know that the Department for Work and Pensions will examine.

**The Convener:** In a sense, you have answered my next question. You spoke about monitoring workforce plus, which—from the evidence that we took—appeared not to be working particularly well. We found that funding was short term, which makes progress more difficult, that the provision of support was a postcode lottery and that there was no collaboration or joint working between agencies. Disabled people made it clear that workforce plus was not working for them.

**Rhona Brankin:** We acknowledge that there is a need to ensure that we have a system in which common approaches are adopted throughout the country.

**The Convener:** We note that recommendation 19 of our report, which was that the Deputy Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning should co-ordinate the work-related action plans under the Scottish Executive's disability equality duty, has been rejected in favour of leaving such matters to each department. Through that recommendation, we sought to ensure direct ministerial responsibility and accountability, but the Executive has declined to take our lead. How will you work to ensure that the spirit of recommendation 19 is advanced by individual Executive departments?

10:15

**Rhona Brankin:** The Executive's disability equality scheme, which has now been published, sets out that we have a key role to play in ensuring that the frameworks that we create help to deliver disability equality and that the policies that we develop take account of disabled people.

You have highlighted that employability issues cover a range of Executive portfolios and functions, including health, skills, education, housing and finance. It will be for each department to ensure that it plays its part, but we have a role to play in monitoring progress.

It is important that the disability equality duty is outcome focused. Departments will need to work together to develop an outcome-focused approach. The systems that we put in place for reviewing progress on the disability equality scheme, on which we will report annually, will help us to ensure that all departments play their part and work together to deliver the outcomes.

**The Convener:** I am confident that your department understands the issues that disabled people in Scotland face and that it is committed to the work that we are discussing, and I am sure that the committee agrees with me on that. However, to put it bluntly, throughout our inquiry we were not confident that the Enterprise, Transport and Lifelong Learning Department had a genuine commitment to equality of opportunity and to other issues relating to equalities. We feel strongly that that needs to be addressed. I realise that it is difficult for you to respond, but I would appreciate it if you took that message away with you.

**Rhona Brankin:** I would be happy to do that. The fact that we will have in place a better system, involving regular reporting and the adoption across departments of an outcomes-based approach, will make it easier for committees such as the Equal Opportunities Committee to hold departments to account for their work, which is as it should be.

**The Convener:** We hope that that will be the case. I am sure that our successor committee will return to the issue, regardless of which members are on it.

The report notes that the current system for employment support in Scotland is not working—that was made clear throughout our evidence taking. Recommendations 24 to 33 and 35 offer the Executive a framework for a revised system of employment support for disabled people in Scotland. The committee welcomes the Executive's commitment to consider the matter further, but we have a number of concerns about the Executive's approach. The Executive notes that the Scottish Union of Supported Employment's blueprint represents a possible way forward, but the committee's recommendations go much further. To go back over the SUSE blueprint would appear to be duplication of work that we have already done.

How will you use our recommendations for a framework as a starting point for the development of a new system of employment support for disabled people and how will you ensure that there is no duplication of work and no going back over old ground?

**Rhona Brankin:** We welcome the detailed work that the committee has done on employment support for disabled people and agree that further

work on developing and promoting supported employment must take place alongside the implementation of workforce plus. I assure the committee that we will use its recommendations to inform our considerations on supported employment, but a great deal of work remains to be done on the detail. We will continue to involve internal and external partners who have a specific interest in the issue in the decisions that we take.

We are already working to raise awareness of supported employment, but further discussions will be necessary to shape the model and develop it further. Those discussions will certainly take account of the committee's recommendations. In addition, we will need to work closely with the DWP as it develops and improves its existing range of specialist disability and employment services.

We are keen to use the committee's recommendations and are aware that it has taken important evidence on the provision of employment support to disabled people. It is an area on which we share the committee's concerns.

**The Convener:** The committee welcomes the Executive's response to recommendation 26, which called for a pilot scheme on employment support to be undertaken. Will you tell us about the methodology and timescale for such a pilot?

**Yvonne Strachan:** There have been initial discussions with the supported employment organisations. The consensus is that more work must be done before we consider a new pilot, as recommended by the committee. It has been agreed that we need to explore whether the language that we are using is clear; consider the quality standards and how they are applied; agree on the model to be used; and look in more detail at existing supported employment activity. One of the key matters that we must look at is our resource position after the election and following the 2007 spending review. There is a commitment to move forward but, before we can decide on the timeframe, account must be taken of those matters.

**The Convener:** That is a welcome response. As you will have read in our report, we heard in evidence that a lot of work is happening. Mike Evans from Dundee said that, although a lot of money was available, there was no strategic approach and no joint working to develop one. The report offers examples that the Executive could work on with local authorities and others. The committee is putting down another marker to look at how this develops. We are also interested in helping its development if necessary.

**Rhona Brankin:** We would welcome that.

**Marilyn Livingstone (Kirkcaldy) (Lab):** Good morning, minister. I have questions for you about

access to further and higher education. Recommendation 45 asks that the Scottish Executive rectify the lack of careers guidance in schools as a matter of urgency. The Executive's response mentions only the work done by Careers Scotland. The committee was extremely concerned about the lack of guidance and training given to teachers and guidance staff about careers advice to disabled people. That was not mentioned in the Executive's response. What assurances can you give us that the training of teachers and careers staff will be dealt with when that recommendation is implemented?

**Rhona Brankin:** We will speak later about transition as one of the key times for any disabled young person. The work that was done as part of the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004 recognised that as well as the need for support and advice to be given to all young people at an early stage so that adequate planning can be put in place for that transition, whether the young person goes into the workforce, training or further or higher education.

The 2004 act places a duty on bodies such as Careers Scotland to work with schools to make sure that that transition is supported. Work is also going on in schools to provide training and support for teachers and information for students and parents on the implementation of the legislation. A guide on transition from school has been produced for the Scottish Executive by Skill Scotland, which is the national bureau for students with disabilities.

The other work that has been done looks at what happens to youngsters when they leave school. The Executive is currently looking at the Scottish school leavers destination survey. As part of that review, we will consider the committee's recommendation on disabled students.

**Marilyn Livingstone:** Thank you for that answer, but we have heard from young people, particularly those with impairments, that when they are making career choices, emphasis has to be on appropriate support and adjustments, as we said in our recommendation. That is really important and I am not 100 per cent certain that my question has been answered. I note all the different strategies that are in place, but what monitoring will take place to ensure that careers advice on the ground will benefit people in that important transitional period? I know that that is probably outwith your departmental remit, but it is a very important issue.

**Rhona Brankin:** I agree absolutely that it is an important issue. It would probably be better if I were to get a detailed response from the relevant department because, as you know, there will be changes to the careers service and its relationship with Scottish Enterprise. I do not want to get into that, but I understand that the careers service will



be involved in all schools. I can certainly get you information about that.

Are you concerned about how youngsters cope when they go on to other courses and how that is monitored?

**Marilyn Livingstone:** At the moment, Careers Scotland is under the remit of Scottish Enterprise, but that will change. We are concerned about the transition period because we heard so many reports from across the board that advice was not in place. Some people have been getting no guidance. We were particularly concerned about when people leave school. It would be helpful to have your report on the situation when so much reform is going on in the area.

**The Convener:** The problem is also that teachers and people who are involved in guidance are not confident—I hesitate to say “not skilled”—that they have the training and support background to enable them to give appropriate careers advice to young disabled people. Too often, we heard either that young disabled people were given no careers advice or that expectations for them were low—the attitude was, “Well, you suffer from this so we will not deal with you.” The issue is about how those involved in giving careers advice understand the possibilities for young disabled people, who have the same aspirations as any other young person. That has not been apparent in the evidence that we heard.

**Marilyn Livingstone:** As I said before, some young people said that there was just no careers advice available to them.

**Rhona Brankin:** It is a matter of consistency. Careers Scotland has an additional support needs policy—

**The Convener:** The policy is not working.

**Rhona Brankin:** That was the concern—that, although Careers Scotland had a policy, it was not working in the way it ought to. The Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004 has been in place for a relatively short while and it will need to be monitored. The key transition period when people are leaving school was recognised in that act as one of the central challenges. It might be useful if I were to get some information from the Education Department about how that is being monitored, what links there are between the careers service and the guidance teachers who provide careers information and the plans for Careers Scotland to go into all schools.

**Marilyn Livingstone:** On the same point, the response to recommendation 45 also notes:

“Careers Scotland’s approach is not to focus on the disability of the individual but on how the disability could impact on the implementation of their career ideas.”

The committee heard in evidence that that was not happening in practice. What additional assurances can the minister give us that that is now how careers advice will be approached?

**Rhona Brankin:** As I said, Careers Scotland has an additional support needs policy but, as you say, that needs to be put into practice. Careers Scotland has given an assurance that it will not focus on a person’s disability. I very much agree with you. Having worked in schools with young people with disabilities, I think that all too often their expectations can be restricted rather than their horizons widened. I am conscious of the issue and I know that Careers Scotland is aware of the committee’s concerns.

10:30

**Marilyn Livingstone:** In recommendation 48, the committee asked that research be undertaken to establish the progress of disabled graduates. The Scottish Executive says that its response to recommendation 45 deals with that, but its response does not mention such research. How will the Executive address recommendation 48, which is important?

**Rhona Brankin:** It is hoped that such work will be done through the survey of Scottish school leavers’ destinations. I am sure that the committee agrees that it is hugely important to have that information when youngsters leave school and when they leave university or college. Too many people have disappeared from sight. We are conscious of the matter and will consider the committee’s recommendation. Including information on disabled students would help.

**Marilyn Livingstone:** In recommendation 50, the committee asked that information on the life changes that are likely to be experienced at college and university be included in careers advice to disabled people. The Scottish Executive says again that its response to recommendation 45 deals with that, but it does not mention such information. How will the Executive address recommendation 50?

**Rhona Brankin:** Careers Scotland has said that it will consider how it can help to give pupils continuing support. Careers advisers will work with individuals and others when appropriate to consider the level of support that they require, and that support should continue. Careers Scotland has not provided much detailed information on the matter and I am happy to ask it for further information.

**Marilyn Livingstone:** That would be much appreciated, because the recommendation is important.

**Rhona Brankin:** Associated with the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004 is guidance in "Supporting Children's Learning: Code of Practice". The Executive has said that, during the review of that code of practice, it will examine whether scope exists to integrate the information as part of the requirements, which is to be welcomed.

**Marilyn Livingstone:** Recommendation 51 is that students should not be asked to pay for assessments, such as dyslexia assessments, to confirm situations that other bodies have acknowledged. We heard quite a bit of evidence about that. The Executive's response is that a recent diagnosis from a relevant professional might be accepted, but we heard evidence that that is not always the case, particularly for further education students who do not receive disabled students allowance. Is the minister willing to ask her ministerial colleagues to investigate further that added cost and barrier?

**Rhona Brankin:** I am happy to consider that with other ministers.

**Marilyn Livingstone:** Thank you.

**Elaine Smith (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab):** I will explore the issue further. I know that the question might not be for the minister and that she might have to pass it on to her colleagues, but short of having all ministers here, we must ask her. Marilyn Livingstone mentioned that a recent diagnosis from a relevant professional might be accepted, but a condition such as dyslexia has no cure, so why does the diagnosis need to be recent? Dyslexia is often diagnosed when a child is seven or eight. Surely that diagnosis should be enough to carry them through their education.

I am concerned that a barrier might be put up because institutions will incur a cost in supporting a young person who has dyslexia, for example. If institutions say that an assessment to confirm a disability needs to be paid for, that might put young people off. If a young person does not have the money for such a confirmation, which can be expensive, the institution will not have to support them with equipment such as a laptop or whatever must be provided.

**Rhona Brankin:** I am happy to ask my colleagues more questions about that and to provide information for the committee.

**The Convener:** That is helpful.

**John Swinburne (Central Scotland) (SSCUP):** I have a young constituent who went right through to the final stages of training at the Scottish Police College before it was discovered that she was mildly dyslexic. Surely a mechanism should exist for all cadets who enter the police or for people who enter other branches of Government service

to be tested for dyslexia sooner rather than later. Is that not elementary procedure?

**Rhona Brankin:** Much as I would like to comment on that, I will not, but if the member would like me to find out about a specific issue, I am happy to do so. In an ideal world, barriers to learning, such as dyslexia, should be picked up very early in a young person's education, although that has not always been the case. Other bodies that are involved in education and training should have policies on appropriate training for staff and should have services to support people who face barriers such as dyslexia.

**Marilyn Livingstone:** Recommendation 53 asks the Scottish Executive to review how key workers are used. The Executive's response does not mention a review and states:

"Careers Scotland will continue to develop best practice in its key worker services".

The committee is keen for that recommendation to be implemented. We are concerned by the response, as we heard evidence that two approaches are used and that Careers Scotland no longer has key workers. Will the minister commit to reconsidering the response and to a review of the provision of key workers? The committee is unsure how best practice can be developed when key workers are not used throughout the country.

**Rhona Brankin:** "More Choices, More Chances: A Strategy to Reduce the Proportion of Young People not in Education, Employment or Training in Scotland" deals with the NEET group and makes a specific commitment on key workers. The work that is being done on post-school psychological services will also be important. We need to obtain more specific information about key workers, and the committee is doing that. The importance of key workers was acknowledged through the 2004 act and through "More Choices, More Chances".

I am interested in the development of post-school psychological services, for which pilots are being undertaken in 20 local authority areas. I am interested in how they fit in with the concept of key workers, because that is unclear.

**The Convener:** One issue is that there is a system in the Highlands and Islands whereas other parts of Scotland do not have one. In creating one system, we could lose something that works well rather than emulate it throughout the structures.

**Rhona Brankin:** Yes. Consistency must be considered when the new set-up is developed.

**Marilyn Livingstone:** To follow up what the convener said, I point out that Scottish Enterprise has a huge role in the work with the NEET group.

We want the minister to give a strong message to the Enterprise, Transport and Lifelong Learning Department that guidance, support and key workers are crucial to that work.

**Rhona Brankin:** I am happy to do that. I agree that the issue is important.

**Marilyn Livingstone:** Recommendation 54 asks the Scottish Executive to work with professional bodies to review occupational standards, with the aim of removing or preventing artificial barriers to disabled people when they choose careers. We feel that the Executive has not responded to our recommendation, so what is the Executive's response to our call for such a review?

**Rhona Brankin:** A UK vocational qualification reform programme, to which the Scottish ministers have signed up, is under way. As part of the programme, the sector skills councils and other bodies must consider whether their current national occupational standards are fit for purpose and whether they need updating or replacing. As part of the exercise, the bodies must ensure that the standards take account of all relevant legislation and that no artificial barriers to access exist. That work is important and, as I said, the Scottish ministers are involved in it.

**Marilyn Livingstone:** The sector skills councils and occupational standards have a role, but, even with the work that you mention, the committee is not confident that artificial barriers do not exist, which is why we are calling for a review. We heard evidence that the work that has been done in the sector skills councils—with which I worked in my previous life—is not enough. There needs to be a review, because we heard disturbing comments about the artificial barriers that have been put in people's way. That is why we called for a real examination of the matter.

**Rhona Brankin:** I am happy to put it on record that a future minister will come back to the committee in the next session of Parliament and give a progress report on the work of the reform programme.

**Marilyn Livingstone:** We welcome that.

Recommendation 64 asks the Scottish Executive to develop solutions to ensure that students do not study life courses just to keep them occupied and do not simply go round a revolving door. However, the Executive's response does not set out how that will be done. One criticism that we heard from quite a few students was that they did not want to go on what they called pretendy courses—they want meaningful further and higher education. What systems will be put in place to ensure that the use of such courses is eliminated and that people can make real life choices?

**Rhona Brankin:** The work that is being done in further education colleges through "Partnership Matters: A Guide to Local Authorities, NHS Boards and Voluntary Organisations on Supporting Students with Additional Needs in Further Education" is important. If co-ordinated learning plans are used as intended, the learner should be central to the discussion of their plan and their needs and wishes should be taken into account. Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education has an important role in that, when it assesses the quality of teaching and learning in further education colleges.

The duty that the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 places on institutions to promote equality of opportunity for disabled people is, in a sense, intended to require a culture shift in institutions so that they think about disabled people in everything that they do, rather than simply focus on individual responses. The intention is to develop the inclusiveness agenda and ensure that all students get a fair deal.

10:45

**The Convener:** We will want to consider that issue further because, in spite of everything that we have heard from colleges, that approach is not being taken across the board. There is frustration about the fact that some students in Scotland do not have the opportunity to fulfil their potential.

**Marilyn Livingstone:** We heard about examples of really good practice, but we must ensure that it is available to individuals throughout the country. The convener is right that people want to fulfil their potential and do not simply want to go round a revolving door.

**Rhona Brankin:** I acknowledge that. Colleges must get the balance right between the need to create courses that are preparation for work and other courses that are geared more toward social inclusion. That balance is sometimes right, but I acknowledge that sometimes there needs to be more focus on courses that equip disabled people with a range of life skills or that provide skills to allow disabled people to participate in the economy.

**Marilyn Livingstone:** The point is valid. We heard time and again about people's commitment to playing a part in the economy. They have so much to give and our nation cannot afford not to give them every chance, as they are a resource.

My final question is about recommendation 65, which asks the Scottish Executive to devise a programme to increase vocational training opportunities for those who wish to take them up. That is moving on to the issue of progression through the various training routes, whether at colleges or through Scottish Enterprise

programmes. The Executive's response does not state whether that will be done. How will the Executive make progress on recommendation 65?

**Rhona Brankin:** Our approach centres on the work that is being done through the new skills for work courses, which emphasise employability. The success of those courses has been acknowledged. Thirteen courses will be rolled out nationally in the autumn of 2007. The skills for work courses are intended to be as inclusive as possible, to ensure that everybody has an equal opportunity to develop knowledge and skills that are important to employment and life. To that end, reasonable adjustments may be made to the courses to ensure that barriers to participation by disabled students are removed. It is understood that the courses should be open to all.

**Marilyn Livingstone:** But how can the recommendation be taken up in a more mainstream sense?

**Rhona Brankin:** It is difficult to be specific when talking about all students. Obviously, many students with disabilities can participate in mainstream vocational courses, with additional support provided by the colleges, whereas others who have more complex needs can participate in programmes that are designed to meet their specific learning needs. HMIE has acknowledged that most colleges have taken an holistic approach to developing employability skills through their vocational courses.

I know that the committee is particularly interested in the area. If members want more specific information, I would be happy to get it. I am not sure whether I am hitting quite the right spot.

**Marilyn Livingstone:** A young person with learning difficulties or a disability who has entered an access to work programme may want to move on to a specific vocational area. That is the transition that concerns me. We heard many people say that they took a general course, a life skills course or a specific skills-based course. They might want to move into a specific vocational area. We are asking about that movement to levels 2 and 3. As you say, huge amounts of resources are not always needed, but planning, support and help are needed. We did not hear about people having difficulty getting to the first stage; most of the evidence that we took related to the second stage. The issue is how we can support people's progression. There needs to be discussion with other departments, as the committee has on-going concerns about the matter.

**Rhona Brankin:** Okay.

**John Swinburne:** My question relates to access to leisure. Recommendation 82 asks that the

active schools programme be reviewed, with a view to making it sustainable and funded in the long term. The Scottish Executive's response does not mention whether such a review will be carried out. Can you assure the committee that that will be done?

**Rhona Brankin:** There is on-going monitoring and evaluation of the active schools programme: progress reports are published annually. The issue of sustainability will be considered in the 2007 spending review.

John Swinburne is concerned specifically about how youngsters who have physical disabilities can take part in the programme. Members will know that 15 special educational needs schools in Scotland have dedicated active schools co-ordinators. Each local authority identifies the requirements for active schools in its area. Although some local authority areas have no dedicated SEN active schools co-ordinators, the youngsters with a disability who are in mainstream education are covered by the active schools co-ordinator for the primary and secondary sectors in those areas. Each local authority has identified a co-ordinator who will identify and work with pupils with a disability. Each of those active schools co-ordinators has received disability inclusion training. Work has been done to include youngsters with disabilities in the active schools programme.

**John Swinburne:** You have virtually answered my next question, which relates to recommendation 83. The committee seeks assurances from you that funding for the active schools programme will be reviewed to allow all young disabled people in Scotland—not just those who live in the council areas that have benefited from current funding—to benefit from it.

**Rhona Brankin:** The spending review will consider broader issues related to funding. We recognise that there is a need to ensure that all youngsters have access to physical activity.

**Marilyn Glen:** My questions relate to attitudes. You have already mentioned the need for a culture shift. In recommendation 94, the committee makes several recommendations about disability equality training. The committee welcomes the fact that the Scottish Executive supports those recommendations, but it is concerned that the Executive is considering setting up an expert group to take forward our and the disability working group's recommendations. The committee's experience of other working groups that were established to consider concrete recommendations that we made has not been positive. The recent strategic group on Gypsies/Travellers went back to square one and negated and duplicated the work that we had done. Can you assure us that our

recommendations and those of the disability working group will be used as the starting point for the expert group's work?

**Rhona Brankin:** That is the intention. The group that we are establishing will not be asked to look again at issues that the committee and the disability working group have already considered. We want to bring in expertise to work with us to take forward the recommendations. There are complex issues, and we need to involve disabled people and others to ensure that we deliver on the recommendations of both the committee and the working group. I know that there have been discussions with some of the main training provider organisations.

**Hilary Third (Scottish Executive Development Department):** This is a sensitive area and a competitive environment, so it is important that we work with the main training providers—disabled people who deliver such training—to ensure that we set the standard at the appropriate level, that quality training is delivered and that take-up is encouraged. We have approached the main training providers and have talked through our suggested approach, which they support. The next step will be for us to convene a meeting with those people to examine how the recommendations should be taken forward. We understand that there is much similarity in the content of courses but that there are differences in how trainers are appointed, assessed and supported, for example. We must work with the training providers and other disabled people to ensure that we get our approach right.

**Marlyn Glen:** We are always concerned about the time that is given to reinventing the wheel.

**Rhona Brankin:** The point is well taken.

**Marlyn Glen:** Recommendation 99 is about developing positive attitudes in young people through citizenship education in schools. The Scottish Executive's response says that the Executive does not want to be prescriptive, but all our evidence points to the importance of influencing attitudes early. The committee recommended that the Executive should take a leadership role in making that happen. Given the importance of the issue, how will the minister ensure that recommendation 99 is fully implemented?

**Rhona Brankin:** This is another important area. Work is being done with Learning and Teaching Scotland on the development of a thematic section on citizenship and equalities for the education for citizenship website, which will include disability as a sub-theme. In addition, the Executive has funded a development officer at Learning and Teaching Scotland to take forward the inclusion agenda, which incorporates disability. I am aware

that the committee feels strongly that specific work should be done on disability. The committee will want to pursue that issue with the Education Department.

**Elaine Smith:** I know that I make this point consistently, but I will do so again. There is already a tried and tested programme: Zero Tolerance's respect programme. Some schools have taken up the programme, but others have not. Given that the Executive considers that it can play a leadership role in the area, it should take an interest in programmes such as respect, which began by addressing the issue of violence against women but which is also extremely helpful in educating all young people about equalities issues. If something is working, and it has been tested and piloted, surely it deserves consideration by the Executive.

11:00

**Rhona Brankin:** That is something for the development officer on inclusion, who will consider the whole inclusion agenda within Learning and Teaching Scotland. I am sure that the committee will follow with interest what happens as a result of the development officer's appointment.

**John Swinburne:** It is not all gloom and doom, and the Executive is making its point in many areas. For the first time, I have been invited to a disabled hustings—something I had never heard of before. It seems as though a fair number of young people are involved. We are making an impact.

**Mr Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** I have some questions on transport. Recommendation 102 in the committee's report asks that

"the Scottish Executive develop a coherent and comprehensive strategy for achieving equality of mobility".

The Executive's response states that that will be done through the implementation of the national transport strategy. What further information can the minister give the committee on how that work will be developed? What specific steps will be taken?

**Rhona Brankin:** Accessibility is one of the key aims of the bus route development grant scheme, which provides short-term grants for up to three years to kick-start new services or to support existing, underused services that have the potential to grow. Local transport authorities work with operators to develop projects that feature increased frequency and improved quality of services as well as improved accessibility of vehicles. Up to now, £24.2 million has been allocated to 46 projects throughout the country.

Work on access can be taken forward through the bus action plan, which was launched last December as part of the national transport strategy. It is the start of a major drive on buses over the next few years. The plan contains 17 actions that are intended to deliver a change to the quality of bus service provision. One of the actions is:

"Examine performance-related funding for payment of Bus Service Operators Grant".

That will draw on lessons from SQUIRE, which is the rail service quality incentive regime. A new bus performance-related scheme could take account of the overall quality and reliability of an operator's services, as well as a range of vehicle issues, including accessibility.

**Mr McGrigor:** Recommendation 103 asks that the strategy for achieving equality of mobility be backed up with clear targets and monitoring. The committee welcomes the commitments given to establishing the strategy. However, we would welcome reassurances about how the strategy will be monitored. What further information can the minister provide to the committee in that regard?

**Rhona Brankin:** The Transport (Scotland) Act 2005 requires all regional transport partnerships to include, as an integral part of the development of the regional transport strategies, information as to how transport as a whole will encourage equal opportunities. It is the duty of each regional transport partnership to draw up a strategy for transport within its region that takes into account a number of factors, such as future needs, how transport in the region will be provided, developed and improved, and how equal opportunities and social inclusion will be encouraged. The strategy will ensure that mobility and travel training is built in, so that investment in services benefits disabled people. The strategies will all include targets once they are completed.

**Mr McGrigor:** The committee welcomes the Scottish Executive's response to recommendation 104, on co-ordination across different transport services, and notes that the Mobility and Access Committee for Scotland will fulfil that role. Elsewhere in the report, the committee notes that MACS must be properly resourced. Is the minister therefore satisfied that MACS is sufficiently resourced to take on that role?

**Rhona Brankin:** Since December 2006, the regional transport partnerships have been subject to the disability general duty and will be consulted on other disability equality duties. The RTPs will address particular social inclusion equality issues through their regional transport strategies. The RTPs will liaise with MACS to ensure that the schemes are co-ordinated. MACS and the newly established Public Transport Users Committee for

Scotland have a shared secretariat, which is intended to allow both bodies to deliver best value for the taxpayer. The decision on the number and grading of staff to be employed by the secretariat was made after discussion of its tasks and duties with the Executive's human resources advisers. The performance of the secretariat will be kept under review.

We will consider any necessary changes in the number of staff as part of that process, but we believe that MACS is adequately resourced for the task. Its programme for 2007-08 includes a commitment to work closely with RTPs to develop a closer working relationship and to review all the regional transport strategies to identify key themes. MACS will then offer advice to the Executive, as appropriate, by the end of 2007, based on evidence from the RTPs. MACS has a hugely important role to play.

**Mr McGrigor:** The committee welcomes the Scottish Executive's response to recommendation 110, on targets for improvements at all railway stations. However, the response outlines only current work and does not mention a rolling programme or a target for accessibility at all stations. What assurances can the minister give the committee that such a programme will be developed?

**Rhona Brankin:** As the committee knows, Network Rail has been allocated a budget of around £4 million a year, through the Great Britain-wide access for all fund, to upgrade stations in Scotland. The stations in Scotland that are to be developed are identified by Transport Scotland. The first six to go through the process are Motherwell, Dalmeir, Kirkcaldy, Mount Florida, Rutherglen and Stirling. Transport Scotland is assessing which stations can be developed over the next few years in order to improve accessibility through the access for all programme. Many of the stations were constructed more than 100 years ago and some of them have difficult engineering challenges to overcome if step-free access for people with reduced mobility is to be provided. It will be impossible to make some stations fully accessible. Through the ScotRail franchise, alternative arrangements for disabled people have been put in place.

In terms of a rolling programme, improvements to a further two stations were announced recently, and four stations are in reserve and are actively being considered. Those developments will use all the funding that has been allocated until March 2009. A further £23 million of funding is expected for the period 2009 to 2015. Transport Scotland is drawing up plans for a full consultation on how the programme of work should be devised. The process is due to start in January 2008.

**Mr McGrigor:** Recommendation 115 asks that

"Travel information be made available in real-time in accessible formats to support disabled people"

to travel. The Scottish Executive's response mentions Traveline Scotland and Traffic Scotland but is silent on how those organisations support disabled people to travel. What specifically will be done to provide disabled people with accessible, whole-journey planning information?

**Rhona Brankin:** I have no information on that to hand, but I am happy to provide it to the committee later.

**Mr McGrigor:** Recommendation 119 asks the Scottish Executive to co-ordinate and fund "long-term, demand-responsive transport". However, the Scottish Executive's response notes funding only until 2008. The committee acknowledges the constraint of funding cycles, but what further work will the Executive do to take that recommendation forward?

**Rhona Brankin:** As members will know, the Executive has funded a number of demand-responsive transport initiatives in both urban and rural areas. In most cases, the Executive has confirmed that funding for those will be on-going until the end of March 2008.

From 1 April 2008, the Scottish Executive will introduce a new and enhanced demand-responsive transport scheme that will be managed by the regional transport partnerships. The scheme will include the current rural and urban demand-responsive transport funding streams and those of two other initiatives that will close at the end of 2007-08. The new scheme will aim to deliver more demand-responsive transport services throughout Scotland and to improve public transport provision by creating greater accessibility for many people.

**Mr McGrigor:** Recommendation 121 asks that the Scottish Executive include demand-responsive travel in the new concessionary fares scheme. The Executive's response states that further expansion of the scheme could take place, but that there would be cost implications. The committee is disappointed by the suggestion that costs would be the overriding factor when disabled people are being denied equal access to transport. What assurances will the minister give the committee that recommendation 121 will be considered further?

**Rhona Brankin:** The Executive has no plans to extend the scheme to all community transport services, but the operation of the scheme is being closely monitored for the first two years following its inception.

**Mr McGrigor:** The committee notes that the Scottish Executive has not responded to

recommendation 126, which calls for the adequate provision of accessible parking. The Executive has also not answered how it will enforce the proper use of accessible parking as the committee recommended in recommendation 127. What is the Executive's full response to recommendations 126 and 127?

**Rhona Brankin:** The report of the research project is now in its final stages. Our intention is to produce a good practice guidance document that will turn the research into some practical recommendations on how to tackle the recognised problem of abuse of the blue badge scheme. In promoting suitable enforcement mechanisms, all local authorities in Scotland can implement traffic regulation orders to protect parking bays that have been designated for disabled people so that the use of such bays is restricted to blue badge holders only.

A report on the use of disabled parking spaces at Scottish stations is produced every six months as part of the franchise requirement. SQUIRE is used to check whether non-badge holders use such spaces inappropriately.

**Elaine Smith:** On that point, have you and your officials had any input on the issue of parking charges at hospitals, which raises equality issues and issues for people with disabilities? Are you aware of any discussions that have taken place about such charges?

**Rhona Brankin:** I do not have information on that before me, but I am happy to provide information to you later.

**Elaine Smith:** The issue is reasonably topical at the moment, so we ought to have some information on it.

Recommendation 134 asks that the Scottish Executive be an example of best practice in the provision of information. I know that Jamie McGrigor asked about provision of travel information, but my question goes wider than that. The Executive's response to recommendation 134 notes that alternative formats are made available

"where the targeted audience is known to include disabled people."

The committee is disappointed by that response. We consider that the Executive should set a positive example by ensuring that as wide a range of information as possible is made available in alternative formats. Can you give me an assurance that you will look into the matter with a view to doing more?

**Rhona Brankin:** Yes. I think that our response to that recommendation could have been written more clearly.

11:15

**Elaine Smith:** The response almost seems to suggest that the Executive will decide what disabled people might be interested in. Obviously, we would have concerns about that.

**Rhona Brankin:** Our policy is that we always aim to provide material in the format that people need. For example, we often produce material in Braille and other formats at the same time. Where we do not do that, we will respond to requests as we receive them. In retrospect, I think that our response to recommendation 134 was not as clear and helpful as it should have been.

**Elaine Smith:** We are reassured by that answer.

Recommendation 148 asks the Scottish Executive to encourage dialogue among construction disciplines and to increase awareness of planning advice note 78 on inclusive design. We welcome the Executive's commitment to consider the issue further. However, can you give us examples of specific measures that the Executive could take to ensure that such dialogue takes place?

**Rhona Brankin:** We very much recognise the importance of dialogue among the various professional disciplines involved. We certainly want to encourage and promote such dialogue. As members might be aware, as part of our efforts to promote forthcoming changes to building standards, we are hosting three-weekly seminars for between 40 and 50 people at our offices in Livingston. The seminars are open to anybody who wishes to attend. We will also be involved in visits to different venues around Scotland to deliver the same presentation to the various professions that are involved in the development of the built environment. Those presentations will continue through April and May. Our action on getting the message out is intended to target approximately 1,000 design professionals and local authority officers as well as other individuals throughout Scotland.

It is hugely important that we make that information available. I am happy to consider the committee's recommendations on how we can take further measures to promote dialogue and understanding among the various different disciplines that are involved in the built environment as well as those who are involved in the whole range of accessibility issues.

**Elaine Smith:** Clearly, complex issues are involved, but the evidence that we took suggested that sometimes, if people just talked to one another, they found that barriers did not need to exist. I know of an example in my constituency where a building was reorganised to allow the installation of automatic doors for the benefit of

wheelchair users, but there was nowhere for such people to go once they got inside the building. Such issues are not complex, but they need people in different disciplines to engage in dialogue with one another. I am pleased that the Executive recognises the importance of that recommendation.

**Rhona Brankin:** Certainly, the planning advice note on inclusive design is intended to be used by a range of disciplines.

**The Convener:** As a committee, we hope that our successor committee will develop a programme to monitor and review progress on the recommendations in our report. It is likely that the successor committee will regularly call on Scottish Executive ministers to participate in the process. What mechanisms will the Executive put in place to monitor the future implementation of the recommendations for which it has responsibility?

**Rhona Brankin:** Clearly, in our response to the committee's report we made many commitments, which we will ensure are progressed. In our response, we made a commitment that the disability working group will take the commitments forward. The work of the disability working group is on-going, and we will work with it and with disabled people to ensure that we make progress in delivering on our wide range of commitments, including those that we made in response to the committee's report.

As you know, under the disability equality duty, we have to report annually on progress towards equality of opportunity for disabled people. We will link the recommendations made by the committee and the disability working group to our work under that duty and the associated reporting mechanisms.

Scottish ministers are required to report in December 2008—and, indeed, every three years thereafter—on the progress that is being made by public authorities. We will put in place systems within the Executive to allow us to monitor progress so that we can publish those reports. We will ensure that delivering on the commitments that we have made to the committee is part of that work. We will build that into our systems. There is a lot of work ahead for us and for the incoming committee.

**The Convener:** Thank you, minister. We have asked lots of questions and have raised expectations. The committee is keen for the recommendations to be taken up, and I am confident that our successor committee will share our views. I welcome your commitment to seek information for us on issues on which you have not been able to respond because they are the responsibility of other departments. I also thank Hilary Third and Yvonne Strachan.



I suspend the meeting for five minutes to allow a changeover of witnesses.

11:29

*On resuming—*

11:21

*Meeting suspended.*

## Age Strategy

**The Convener:** Agenda item 3 is the Scottish Executive's strategy for an aging population. The minister has stayed with us for this item—I invite her to make opening remarks before we ask questions.

**Rhona Brankin:** Scotland's changing demography is an undeniable fact. It is projected that, by 2031, the number of people aged over 50 will have risen by 28 per cent and that the number of people aged over 75 will have increased by 75 per cent.

As members are aware, 2007 has been identified by the European Commission as the European year of equal opportunities for all. That provides us with a fresh focus for our current work to promote diversity and equal opportunities. The issue of Scotland's aging population is a vital component of the equality challenge that faces us.

The recent document "All Our Futures: Planning for a Scotland with an Ageing Population" sets out the Scottish Executive's vision for the future and outlines the value of, and benefits to be gained from, an aging population. Age discrimination has been identified as an embedded vice in our society: tackling ageism at its core will provide the basis on which an effective strategy can be built in order to remove the barriers that are faced by older people.

Lord Sutherland, who headed the board that developed the Scotland's Futures Forum report "Growing older and wiser together", has pointed out the need to highlight the positive side of growing older and to give older people the opportunity to flourish and contribute to the wider community. The vision that is set out in "All Our Futures" is the result of one of the most extensive evidence-gathering processes that the Scottish Executive has undertaken. Our consultation on age and experience ran from March to June 2006. More than 1,300 responses were received and they went on to inform the strategy. The consultation was supported by other in-depth evidence gathering, as well as by an external advisory group.

"All Our Futures" has a clear message: we must challenge all sectors to tackle ageism, to build stronger links between the generations and to maximise the contribution that older people make to society. The document outlines how £27 million of allocated funding will be used to promote that vision. Included in it are plans to establish a national forum on aging and a new Scottish centre for intergenerational practice. A campaign to

combat ageism and to promote positive images of older people will be undertaken and additional funding will be allocated to support volunteering. The work of those initiatives and others will encompass the vision that is set out in the strategy, and will promote and actively engage in activities to make the vision a reality. The national stakeholder event that is planned for the end of 2007 will serve as an opportunity to assess the progress that has been made.

The Employment Equality (Age) Regulations 2006 came into force in October 2006 and we are confident that various initiatives are already under way in Scotland to promote understanding of the implications of the regulations. Commendable work is being done by groups such as Equality Forward, which will stage an event in May to address age equality in universities and colleges, and Age Concern Scotland, which is working to raise awareness among employers, employees, learners and learning providers. In addition, the work that the committee did last year in its taking stock exercise on age is echoed in many of the themes and recommendations in "All Our Futures".

Work to respond to our aging population must be supported and continued. It is only by taking on board the thinking of the committee, Scotland's Futures Forum and the Executive's document "All Our Futures" that we may begin to challenge negative views of old age and move forward with an effective and co-ordinated strategy for the future.

**The Convener:** Thank you, minister. I welcome Fiona Hird from the Scottish Executive's equality unit. Yvonne Strachan remains with us.

During the development of the strategy, the Executive used a variety of consultation methods to engage with people, including policy briefings, focus groups and an interactive website. How confident are you that the comments that you received are reflected in the strategy?

**Rhona Brankin:** We took a number of steps to ensure meaningful engagement. We wanted to ensure that the consultation was clear and accessible. We asked a small number of open questions and we commissioned work to target people over 50 in the black and ethnic minority communities. All those steps combined to give a genuinely impressive total of more than 1,300 responses, many of which came from individuals and small organisations.

The consultation was supplemented by other evidence-gathering work. There was a telephone survey, and focus groups and seminars were organised by key external stakeholders, which also provided policy briefings. You will also be aware that we were advised by an external advisory group.

**The Convener:** In a sense, you have answered the question that I was going to ask next, about harder-to-reach people, but I am not sure that you answered my first question. How confident are you that the views of all the people from whom you took evidence are reflected in the strategy?

**Rhona Brankin:** I am confident that their views are reflected in the strategy. Later, I will give some detail on the forthcoming national forum on aging, which we will set up to assist with implementation of the strategy. Clearly, the composition of that group will reflect the breadth of the issues that we need to take forward.

**Fiona Hird (Scottish Executive Development Department):** The themes that arose from the consultation include the importance of links between the generations, the strongly expressed feeling that people should not be written off because of their age, and the importance of services that listen to older people and respond to their needs. Those themes fed through clearly to the six priority themes of the strategy.

**John Swinburne:** Does the minister think that it was remiss to have a consultation on elderly people without approaching the only elected member in the UK who represents older people, or his party, for a contribution? I add that the consultation was before Rhona Brankin's time as Minister for Communities.

**The Convener:** I think that the question was asked of the previous Minister for Communities, but the minister can answer it if she feels able to do so.

**Rhona Brankin:** I cannot answer for previous ministers, but a member of the Scottish Pensioners Forum was involved in the advisory group. I am sure that Mr Swinburne made an effective contribution to the consultation.

**John Swinburne:** The Scottish Pensioners Forum receives funding from the Government on the condition that the forum is not political. That is a one-sided approach if the Executive then seeks opinions on political action that it may carry out.

**Rhona Brankin:** I do not agree with that.

**The Convener:** It is clear that the Scottish Pensioners Forum was legitimately represented.

**Marilyn Livingstone:** Do you agree that all elected members represent older people?

**John Swinburne:** My answer to that is—

**The Convener:** John, I am convening the meeting—

**John Swinburne:** The member asked a question.

**Marilyn Livingstone:** I asked the minister.

**Rhona Brankin:** I agree with Marilyn Livingstone's view. I hope that John Swinburne contributed to the consultation, just as any MSP was able to do.

**Marlyn Glen:** What is the strategy's added value, given the other policy initiatives that aim to improve older people's lives?

**Rhona Brankin:** It is true to say that our document reflects the consensus view on our changing demography. A lot has been written about what is happening to our population and the changes that are occurring. The strategy echoes the findings of the committee's taking stock exercise and the Scotland's Futures Forum report "Growing older and wiser together". It offers us an opportunity to rethink our attitudes and to enhance the role of older people in society, but the key difference is that the strategy puts them in the context of current and future Scottish Executive policy. It is the role of Government to do that.

In the strategy, we set out clear commitments for future action. The strategy will not sit on the shelf. It is a manifesto for change that will drive forward our policies and actions in future years.

**Mr McGrigor:** The strategy sets out six priorities for strategic action. Why were they chosen?

**Rhona Brankin:** They were, in effect, chosen because they emerged quickly from our consultation. They were reinforced by the additional evidence-gathering process and were endorsed by our external advisory group. I was not involved at that time, so Fiona Hird may want to say a bit more.

**Fiona Hird:** The priorities emerged as clear themes throughout and there was consensus about their importance.

**Mr McGrigor:** Under point 1 of the action plan, you say:

"**Scottish Enterprise and Highlands and Islands Enterprise** will pilot Personal Enterprise Shows with specific emphasis on people aged over 50 and consider how they might promote entrepreneurial activity among the over 50s."

Can you be a bit more specific about what form the personal enterprise shows will take?

**Rhona Brankin:** I cannot give you a huge amount of detail on them, but I can get specific information from Scottish Enterprise. The personal enterprise shows are intended to support older people who wish to set up in business. In looking at the work, I came across a surprising statistic, which is that quite a lot of over 50s are setting up in business. In fact, more over 50s than those aged 20 to 25 are setting up in business. We think that that older age group is potentially a fertile area for skills, expertise and knowledge. Scottish Enterprise has committed to working with the older

age group to encourage people to set up businesses.

**Mr McGrigor:** The strategy contains a 47 point action plan to support the six strategic priorities. Over what timescale will the action plan be implemented?

**Rhona Brankin:** Where possible, we have made a commitment on timing. For example, we said that we will hold a national stakeholder event at the end of 2007 and will make regular reports to Parliament, starting in 2008. Once the national forum on aging is in place, I expect it to set the pace. It is important that the national forum be involved in such thinking.

**Mr McGrigor:** The strategy and action plan is detailed and announces several new initiatives. What funding has the Scottish Executive put in place to implement the strategy and action plan?

**Rhona Brankin:** As you will know, there is on-going funding. Between 2003-04 and 2007-08, Scottish Executive funding for the 60-plus age group increased by 5 per cent per annum in real terms and now stands at £5.2 billion. We have committed funding to support the "All Our Futures" strategy and we will deliver on the commitments. Obviously, the future funding commitment of £27 million for 2007-08 will be spent in that financial year. Further spending will need to be agreed through the spending review process.

**Marilyn Livingstone:** The committee notes that the Scottish Executive will establish a national forum on aging. What will the organisation's remit be and how will its membership be appointed?

**Rhona Brankin:** It is intended that the organisation will be broadly based and that it will act as a champion for the "All Our Futures" strategy. It will raise awareness and provide advice and assistance to all sectors in developing responses to the strategy. I expect the forum to be challenging and proactive—its role and remit will, in liaison with stakeholders, be decided with that in mind. We have allocated £100,000 for the forum's first year of work. However, I would welcome the committee's views on the proposal to set up a national forum on aging.

**Marilyn Livingstone:** Thank you for that answer. I am sure that our successor committee will be happy to work with the Executive on the forum.

11:45

**Elaine Smith:** I am not entirely clear about how people would be appointed to the forum. Would the Executive decide who to appoint? Would you call for applications? How, exactly, would the process work?

**Rhona Brankin:** We are still relatively open on the matter and we have not made any final decisions, but we are clear that membership should be broadly based and that the body should act as a champion for the strategy that we have developed in “All Our Futures”.

**Elaine Smith:** I think that it would work better if it did not look like the membership had simply been decided on and appointed by the Executive.

**The Convener:** That point is well made.

**Marilyn Livingstone:** The strategy mentions regular reports to Parliament from 2008. What are those reports likely to include and how regular will they be?

**Rhona Brankin:** I see much value in the minister who has responsibility for communities reporting to Parliament every year or every second year. I would be happy to hear the committee's views on that.

**Marilyn Livingstone:** The committee notes that the Scottish Executive will work with others to establish the Scottish centre for intergenerational practice. What further information can you provide to the committee on how that body will be established and the functions that it will carry out?

**Rhona Brankin:** In the evidence-gathering process, people consistently called for progress to be made on intergenerational work. The centre for intergenerational practice will be set up with £200,000, in the first year, to help to develop intergenerational work across Scotland. Specifically, it will promote best practice and offer support to individuals, organisations, businesses and others who want to get involved in intergenerational work. It will work with partners across Scotland and, importantly, with the national forum on aging and it will draw on the expertise of the United Kingdom centre for intergenerational practice to develop measures of success for intergenerational work. Government will work with the new centre to support further mentoring schemes for young adults and older people in order to facilitate sharing of experiences and learning of skills.

From meetings that I have had, I know that a wide range of people is interested in intergenerational work in Scotland, so we will work with them to take forward the proposals. The committee will be aware of work that is being done by community service volunteers in relation to the retired and senior volunteer programme and in schools. A lot of interesting work is happening. We are confident that the centre will have a lot of work to do.

**Marilyn Livingstone:** One of the criticisms of the strategy could be that it is overly dependent on the role of older people as volunteers. The

committee worries that such a strong emphasis on volunteering might not be appropriate. How will you ensure that, even though the strategy will rely on older people volunteering, it will not rely totally on older people as volunteers?

**Rhona Brankin:** The strategy recognises that people need to have flexibility about the choices that they make. For example, people who want to do part-time work should be offered a range of choices. We will be working with businesses to examine how that agenda can be taken forward.

Increasingly, as people get older and remain healthy longer, many more people want to make a contribution to society and they should be supported in doing so. It is not a question of forcing anyone to do anything.

**Marilyn Livingstone:** The strategy outlines a new campaign to combat ageism and to promote more positive images of old people. Can you give us an insight into how that will be developed?

**Rhona Brankin:** That relates to something that came through strongly when we were developing the strategy. There was a strong feeling that ageism is an unacceptable form of intolerance.

We have committed £750,000 for a campaign to combat ageism and to promote more positive images of older people. I do not know whether the committee is aware of the see me campaign on mental health. We think that it has been an impressive campaign—it is the kind of thing that we will be looking at. We need to ensure that we reduce intolerance and begin to break down attitudinal barriers.

**John Swinburne:** I appreciate your sincerity on ageism and everything that you have said, which you did so lucidly. As an older person, can I give you a bit of advice? Could you get your own house in order? Parliament is agist—MSPs who are 75 or over do not enjoy the same pension facilities as younger MSPs.

**The Convener:** That is not really an issue for the minister.

**John Swinburne:** But it is ageism. I am sorry, convener—we are talking about ageism, and that is an agist policy. I am asking the minister to take it up with the relevant minister.

**The Convener:** That is not an issue for the minister.

**Rhona Brankin:** Indeed, it is an issue for the Presiding Officer. However, John Swinburne might be interested in hearing about what we have been doing recently in the Executive.

**Fiona Hird:** With effect from October last year, the Scottish Executive has had a no-retirement-age policy for civil servants below senior civil service level. Previously, the retirement age was

60, and people could stay on until 65 on a year-to-year basis with no absolute right. However, that has changed since last October and people can now work for as long as they wish to—the choice is theirs.

**Rhona Brankin:** The policy is intended to give flexibility to older people.

**John Swinburne:** Can I also point out that the pensions are not carried on after the age of 75? Be warned: after the election, there will be older people than me in here. There are some very good older candidates.

**Rhona Brankin:** “Be warned”? I do not know about that—there are quite a lot of us already.

**The Convener:** Absolutely.

**Elaine Smith:** I am delighted to support the strategy, not least because Councillor Charles Gray—one of my constituents—is the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities spokesperson on older people and was on the external advisory committee. We have had discussion about that.

I am keen to hear a wee bit more about the detail. In particular, the strategy points to a vision with 12 outcomes against which we will measure its success. The outcomes look excellent, but how realistic do you consider them to be and over what timescale do you think that they will be achieved? For example, one outcome is:

“Vulnerable older people are protected, safe, and are free from fear.”

I am sure that we all share that aspiration, but are you confident that it will be achieved and what timescale would you put on it?

**Rhona Brankin:** The outcomes were developed through working closely with the external advisory group, and they represent an aspiration for Scotland in the future. If we do not set ourselves challenging targets, it is harder to make meaningful progress, and I certainly expect to be held to account for progress against those outcomes by Parliament and the national forum on aging.

The vision for Scotland in the 12 outcomes is aspirational, and we want it to be achieved in the next 20 years. We thought that it was important to be visionary and have outcomes that would set a challenge for us—we know that they are challenging.

**Elaine Smith:** That is right. We all want to see those outcomes, but it is important to have some means of measuring whether progress is being made on them. How and when would you take stock of them?

**Fiona Hird:** We recognise that these are high-level outcomes for the long term and that they

represent where we ideally want to be. However, we think that it is important for us to be able to measure progress along the way. We believe that all the outcomes are susceptible to the development of appropriate indicators, which we will work on—probably with the national forum—over the next few months so that we can measure progress in terms of what the strategy means for people's lives.

**Elaine Smith:** That will be helpful. We can all sign up to these aspirational outcomes, but we will want to know how they will be delivered in practice.

**Rhona Brankin:** Many different people will be involved in delivering the outcomes, so the process will be quite complex.

**Elaine Smith:** The outcomes rely on the involvement of other sectors, such as the voluntary sector and business. Are you confident that they will be able to carry out the work that you expect of them to make the strategy a reality?

**Rhona Brankin:** Yes. There is no doubt that there is a lot of work to be done with a range of organisations. We have said clearly that we intend to work with employers in both the private and public sectors, as well as with the self-employed and volunteers.

In looking at the role of employers, we have committed to certain actions. For example, we need to act as an exemplar employer and promote best practice in flexible employment. We have mentioned the Executive's no-retirement-age policy. We will work through equality matters in business with Scottish Enterprise and with small and medium-sized enterprises to promote the business benefits of employing and retaining older workers. Enterprise networks will need to monitor older people's interest in setting up new businesses—we have touched on that—and develop new marketing approaches that are aimed at older people. We have touched on the role of personal enterprise shows.

In addition, in partnership with the business sector and our enterprise agencies and networks, we can help to support and grow what is called—although I am not sure that I like the name—the silver economy. We recognise that more needs to be done, and we will have discussions with business organisations as well as with individual businesses about the role that they can play.

**Elaine Smith:** That is important. I presume that the ways in which employers in the voluntary sector and the business sector are helping to deliver the outcomes will be included in the monitoring that Fiona Hird talked about.

People should be given the opportunity to continue working past retirement age, although it

should not be compulsory. Constituents have said to me that they do not welcome being made to retire at a certain age. Teachers, for instance, can continue to do supply teaching whereas someone who works in an office may have to retire. It is important to allow some flexibility and choice.

**The Convener:** How will departments work together on the issues? Earlier, in our disability inquiry, we took evidence on other issues around mainstreaming that we have raised with the Executive, and we have taken evidence on mainstreaming from your department. How will other departments, such as the Enterprise, Transport and Lifelong Learning Department, fulfil their responsibilities under the strategy?

**Fiona Hird:** The strategy has Cabinet agreement, and all ministers are committed to the principles that are involved. We will take steps internally, at official level in the Executive, to ensure that the actions in the strategy are progressed and that mechanisms are set up accordingly.

**Rhona Brankin:** Individual ministers and officials were involved in drawing up the strategy—clearly, we could not draw it up ourselves. We have worked with different departments to draw together the strategy, so it will have to be implemented across all departments. Individual ministers will be responsible for ensuring that the proposed actions and work are carried out.

12:00

**John Swinburne:** You talked about older people starting up in business. One of the main reasons for their doing so is the obvious fact that, in the five years prior to retirement, 40 per cent of men and women find themselves unemployed. The ones with a bit of initiative go and do something about it.

Relative to employment after retirement age, will there be any legislation to give the strategy some muscle? When a nurse reaches 60 but does not want to retire, she is allowed to work on. That is now allowed but, prior to Andy Kerr's intervention, nurses had to retire at 60. Do you think that the new practice will spread over industry?

**Rhona Brankin:** Legislation in that area is reserved to Westminster, but the work that is being done with employers and employers' organisations should help to develop the kind of flexible approach that companies such as B&Q and Marks and Spencer are developing. We think that that work is important.

Older people sometimes set up businesses for the reason that John Swinburne gave, but they might also do so because they have some savings, are keeping well and do not want to retire

at the retirement age. They may have a lot of energy and be keen to do something. There are a variety of reasons why people aged over 50 make effective entrepreneurs. We think that there is scope to support them in doing that, which will benefit the Scottish economy as well.

**The Convener:** A major issue for many older people is pensions and benefits. During our evidence session with the previous Minister for Communities, he undertook to send all the comments that were received on reserved matters to the Westminster Government. How has that been achieved?

**Rhona Brankin:** Yes, I am conscious of that. The UK Government published its strategy document, "Opportunity Age", in 2005. Indeed, we took that publication into account in drawing up our strategy. Where reserved issues have featured in our consultation process, we have passed on the relevant information to the UK Government. The UK Pensions Bill will ensure equality between men and women.

It would, however, be a mistake to downplay the importance of the issues that are covered by the Scottish Parliament. I am sure that the committee does not want to do that. There are hugely important issues that are devolved to the Parliament, some of which specifically concern older people, and there is a lot of work that we need to do on reserved issues under the strategy. Of course, we will continue to work with the UK Government where we can add value—for example, through our work on benefits uptake and the pensioners guide that was published by the Department for Work and Pensions, which is very important. However, we will continue to develop our own initiatives, such as free central heating—which, importantly, includes a free benefits check.

There is much that we can do to supplement some of the Westminster Parliament's work, but a lot of important areas that we need to tackle are devolved.

**The Convener:** How is the Scottish Executive publicising the strategy to ensure that people of all ages know about it?

**Rhona Brankin:** We agree that that is important. We have a proactive media strategy, through which we are targeting the national media and the more specialised press. At the moment, we are focusing on publicising the launch of the strategy, but we will seek to engage specific interest groups to gain their commitment to the delivery of key outcomes. Many people will be involved in the delivery of the strategy. For example, we will ensure that pensioners groups get a version of the document and we will produce a short newsletter for issue to older people and

their organisations. We have a job to do in disseminating information on the strategy.

**The Convener:** In what formats and languages will you make the strategy available and how will you publicise the existence of that provision?

**Rhona Brankin:** A range of publications is available. In the first instance, they are available at [www.scotland.gov.uk/experience](http://www.scotland.gov.uk/experience), but the key documents are also available in hard copy and in an accessible format. We are happy to provide documents in alternative formats, if requested. As I said, we will provide a newsletter specifically for older people and their organisations.

**Fiona Hird:** During the consultation phase, we issued "Age and Experience: Consultation on the Strategy for a Scotland with an Ageing Population" on request in Braille and Gaelic. For our work with black and minority ethnic groups, the document was not issued in individual community languages; instead, host-facilitated discussions took place with members of various groups, who then worked on their responses. We felt that that approach was more profitable. We will take the same open approach to the dissemination of the strategy, which will be done through issuing information in paper forms and through discussion with interested groups.

**Rhona Brankin:** We are interested in having discussions with the groups that were involved in the consultation about how best to get the information out there.

**The Convener:** John Swinburne informed me earlier that he would like to make a short statement and then ask the minister several questions.

**John Swinburne:** Thank you, convener. My statement will be even shorter than I thought it would be.

The strategy is strong on volunteering, because that involves people doing good work at no cost to the state. Because there are insufficient nursery and pre-school places, some parents have to leave children with their grandparents to go out to work. My contention is that the state should pay those grandparents at least the same rate as entry-level nursery staff receive. The same argument applies to kinship carers, although I know that that issue is being addressed. However, when children are taken from families who are affected by drugs, generally speaking, the social workers' first port of call is the grandparents, if they are deemed to be suitable. Children are often placed with their grandparents, but no support is provided for a considerable time. That is wrong, because the grandparents are in effect fostering those children, so they should be provided with the wherewithal to give the children the amenities,

food, clothing and everything else that they require.

Way back in 2003, when Jack McConnell brought out "Building a Better Scotland", I said to him that only 79 words in that whole 52-page document related to senior citizens and pensioners. I forecasted that, before the next election, he would bring out 79 chapters on the issue, somewhere or other. He has exceeded my expectation, because he has produced 150 pages of promises, and very good promises they are, too. Unfortunately, the Executive does not have the teeth to implement them fully and there is not enough stress on gender inequality. Everyone meekly accepts that there is no comparison between a woman's pension and a man's pension, even after means testing is taken into account. I have yet to meet the woman who is not the equal of a man. The gender inequality in pensions must be addressed urgently.

**The Convener:** Do you have any questions, or are you finished?

**John Swinburne:** I am happy at that.

**The Convener:** Minister, do you want to respond to any of those comments?

**Rhona Brankin:** As I said, the UK Government is carrying out an important piece of work on equality in pensions. I am sure that John Swinburne welcomes the UK Government's commitment to tackling that issue.

I am glad that Mr Swinburne recognises the First Minister's commitment to working with older people, to ensuring that their quality of life is as good as it should be and to delivering the vision that we have set out in "All Our Futures".

**The Convener:** As there are no more questions, I thank the minister, Yvonne Strachan and Fiona Hird for their evidence.

I put on the record our congratulations to the minister on becoming a granny.

12:10

*Meeting suspended.*

12:11

*On resuming—*

## Subordinate Legislation

### **Disability Discrimination (Public Authorities) (Statutory Duties) (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2007 (SSI 2007/195)**

**The Convener:** Agenda item 4 is subordinate legislation. The Disability Discrimination (Public Authorities) (Statutory Duties) (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2007 add to the list of public authorities—those authorities that will be required to publish a disability equality scheme—to which the Disability Discrimination (Public Authorities) (Statutory Duties) (Scotland) Regulations 2005 (SSI 2005/565) apply. The regulations will come into force on 1 April 2007 and will remain in force unless they are annulled by the Parliament within 40 days of their being laid before it. No motion to annul the regulations has been lodged. Are members content with the regulations?

**Members** *indicated agreement.*

**The Convener:** Are members content to report to the Parliament that the committee has no recommendation to make on the regulations?

**Members** *indicated agreement.*

## **European Year of Equal Opportunities for All 2007**

12:12

**The Convener:** Agenda item 5 is feedback on the meeting that I attended with the Scottish Executive equality unit on plans for the European year of equal opportunities for all.

The meeting was an opportunity for an initial discussion about how the year might be taken forward. Many ideas were suggested and an outline of potential events was agreed. Members will note from paper EO/S2/07/06/05, which has been circulated, that the Scottish Executive will outline more detailed plans for the year at the launch event later today and that a further meeting to discuss the plans in more detail will be held in April. I expect that the committee will want to be involved in any plans, and that it will want to comment on them.

Do members agree to the action that is proposed in paragraph 7 of paper EO/S2/07/06/05?

**Members** *indicated agreement.*

**Elaine Smith:** We thank you for your contribution and your report, convener.

**The Convener:** You are welcome.

As this is our final meeting of the session, I want to say a few words of thanks. I thank the official report staff, our security officers, broadcasting, the Scottish Parliament information centre, all our witnesses, all those who attended events and consultation meetings and all those who submitted written evidence to the committee. Most of all, on behalf of the committee, I thank our clerking team, which has been wonderful, not only in Edinburgh, but in Orkney, Ayr and all the other places that we have visited to conduct our inquiry work. The team has helped us to do the work that we have needed to do.

We will now discuss in private a draft annual report and a draft report on our review of equalities in Scotland.

12:14

*Meeting continued in private until 12:16.*



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