EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE

Tuesday 2 October 2007

Session 3

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EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE
3rd Meeting 2007, Session 3

CONVENER

*Margaret Mitchell (Central Scotland) (Con)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Elaine Smith (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Marlyn Glen (North East Scotland) (Lab)
*Bill Kidd (Glasgow) (SNP)
Michael McMahon (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
*Hugh O'Donnell (Central Scotland) (LD)
*Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP)
*Bill Wilson (West of Scotland) (SNP)

COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTES

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Jamie Hepburn (Central Scotland) (SNP)
Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Jim Tolson (Dunfermline West) (LD)

*attended

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Terry Shevlin

ASSISTANT CLERK

Roy McMahon

LOCATION

Committee Room 1

Scottish Parliament

Equal Opportunities Committee

Tuesday 2 October 2007

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 11:05*]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Margaret Mitchell): Good morning, everyone, and welcome to the third meeting in session 3 of the Equal Opportunities Committee. I remind all present—including members—that mobile phones and BlackBerrys should be turned off completely as they interfere with the broadcasting system, even when the sound is switched off.

The first item on the agenda was to have been a declaration of interests by new committee member Michael McMahon; instead, we have his apologies. However, we are delighted that Michael McMahon has been appointed as the third Labour member on the committee.

Under agenda item 2, may I have members' permission to take items 6 and 7 in private?

Members *indicated agreement*.

Budget Process 2008-09

11:05

The Convener: Agenda item 3 is on the budget process. Members have the clerk's paper before them. The draft budget is not due to be published until mid to late November, but the paper sets out various actions that the committee might wish to take in advance. Do members have any general comments on the paper before we look at the recommendations in detail?

Marlyn Glen (North East Scotland) (Lab): As a member of the Equal Opportunities Committee in the previous session, I was a little concerned by the quotation from the legacy paper that the committee had

"agreed to step back its equalities scrutiny of the budget".

Although the idea of stepping back seems to be problematic, the budget paper goes on to explain in detail what we will be doing, which will be taking a different approach rather than stepping back. I am pleased that the committee will take seriously its scrutiny of the budget process, because it is essential that we do so.

The Convener: If members have no further comments, I have a comment about the legacy paper. When we looked at some of the strategies for equality proofing, we got caught up in the language used rather than getting to grips with some of the tangible equality proofing outcomes that the committee hoped to monitor and put in place. We hoped to look at how resources are spent and the consequent outcomes. It would be superb if we could focus more on that.

Let us look at the various recommendations in the budget paper, the first of which is on page 4. Before commencing formal scrutiny of the draft budget, and recognising the limited time available, members are invited to consider whether they wish to receive a more detailed and factual briefing on equality proofing the budget from the equality proofing budget and policy advisory group, which was set up by the Scottish Executive and has a broad membership of people who have looked at equality issues. It would be worth while to hear from that group. Do members also wish to hear from the Scottish women's budget group? I have met the members of that group privately and was impressed with their knowledge of the problems of equality proofing as a cross-cutting issue.

Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP): It is absolutely right that those groups come along and advise us. I support the recommendation and ask that if any relevant papers are available, we have them in advance of the next meeting.

The Convener: That is fine. Are we all agreed that we will ask the equality proofing budget and policy advisory group and the Scottish women's budget group to speak to the committee?

Members *indicated agreement*.

The Convener: The next recommendation is in paragraph 27. Members are asked to decide whether they wish to discuss with the current Finance Committee budget adviser the appropriate role of the Equal Opportunities Committee in the budget scrutiny process. Alternatively, the committee might want to appoint its own budget adviser.

Elaine Smith (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab): Given the short timescale for scrutiny, it is important that the committee looks to appoint its own budget adviser and I recommend that course of action. That budget adviser might then wish to discuss the scrutiny role in more detail with the Finance Committee budget adviser; in fact, the two options might not necessarily be exclusive because the committee might wish to do that as well.

I would like to promote the idea that we appoint our own budget adviser. We would have to take into account the short timescale in determining the work that the adviser would do for us but, because the timescales are short, it is important that we have someone who can examine the budget with equality eyes and advise us accordingly.

Hugh O'Donnell (Central Scotland) (LD): I support Elaine Smith's position on appointing an adviser. It is important that we have an equal opportunities focus on the budget. The subject committees all have their own portfolio areas to deal with and it is important that we are no less well advised than them on the budget.

The Convener: Are we agreed?

Members *indicated agreement*.

The Convener: The committee will look to appoint its own adviser. We will have to ask the Parliamentary Bureau for permission to appoint an adviser. Our paper to the bureau will outline a person specification—obviously, we will be looking for somebody with expertise in Government finance with an equal opportunities perspective. It will also include specific duties that the adviser would perform, such as advising the committee on witnesses, its analysis of the evidence and the drafting of the final report.

I understand that we are about to go into recess, but arrangements can be made to put the paper in front of the bureau as soon as possible so that, when we meet again after the recess, we will—I hope—have approval and the Scottish Parliament information centre will have drawn up a list of potential advisers.

Is everyone happy with that?

Members *indicated agreement*.

The Convener: The next recommendation is in paragraph 30:

"Members are invited to discuss whether they wish to write to the Scottish Government, in order to understand the equality principles that will shape the presentation of the forthcoming Draft Budget and Spending Review document."

Are we in favour of that?

Marlyn Glen: Definitely. It is a really good idea to write and it is timely that we do it now, before the budget is set in stone, as a reminder to everybody of the importance of the equality principles.

The Convener: Hugh, do you have something to say?

Hugh O'Donnell: Marlyn has adequately covered what I was going to say.

Bill Kidd (Glasgow) (SNP): It is important that, right at the beginning of the session, we establish the fact that we want everyone in the Parliament to pursue the equality agenda.

The Convener: It sounds like we are all agreed with that recommendation.

I will recap. The committee has decided that it will receive a briefing from the equality proofing budget and policy advisory group and the Scottish women's budget group. It will discuss with the Finance Committee's budget adviser the appropriate budget scrutiny role for the committee. It will seek permission to appoint its own budget adviser and will ask the Scottish Government to explain the equality principles that will shape the draft budget and spending review document.

The last recommendation, which I have not mentioned although it is the most important, is:

"The Committee is invited to discuss whether it wishes to incorporate, where possible, budget considerations into its work."

Are we agreed?

Members *indicated agreement*.

The Convener: That is a resounding yes. It is fundamental to the committee's work.

Petition

Disabled People (Local Transport) (PE695)

11:13

The Convener: Petition PE695 was forwarded to us for information only but it shows that, when people present a petition to the Public Petitions Committee, there is often a positive outcome. The kind of things that the petitioner wants from the petition are all covered in our disability inquiry report, and the committee has decided that consideration of the report's recommendations will form a main plank of its work in the next few months. To that end, we will receive an in-depth analysis of how far those recommendations are being implemented.

I thought that it was good to include the petition on our agenda to show that there is a positive outcome from the Public Petitions Committee's work, in that the petitioner's request is being actioned in this committee. It also emphasises that the work that we are committed to doing on the disability inquiry report's recommendations is appreciated. We will address real issues in that work.

Do I have the committee's permission to write to the petitioner to advise her of what will happen?

11:15

Bill Kidd: Is that to emphasise that the monitoring work continues and has not come to an end simply because the petition has been closed?

The Convener: No. In fact, it is to outline and confirm the fact that we will take up the points that were made in the petition as part of our consideration of the implementation of the disability inquiry report.

European Union (Committee Engagement)

11:16

The Convener: Agenda item 5 is consideration of the committee's approach to European Union-related work. I will ask for general comments from members on the paper on European Union engagement. However, my real reason for flagging up the matter is that a proposal may jump out at us very early in the EU's policy-making process and, if we get in early enough and indulge in conversation with EU officials before it becomes a green paper, a white paper and then established policy, we can alter the policy direction. That happened in the Justice 1 Committee in session 2, as Marlyn Glen will remember.

Do members have any comments on the paper?

Bill Wilson (West of Scotland) (SNP): I rather like the offer of a scene-setting briefing from the Scottish Parliament's European officer. I suggest that the committee should up take that offer.

Hugh O'Donnell: It is important that we keep a good, close weather eye on EU directives because the Parliament is responsible for implementing them. The more advance knowledge we have of what is coming down the track at us, the more chance we have of making considered, informed decisions.

Marlyn Glen: I support the idea of an initial scene-setting briefing. That is an excellent idea. Perhaps, within that briefing, we could have some information on the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and how it affects everybody. It is too easy to consider things in isolation and get confused about which European group is doing what.

This morning, I had an e-mail from the European women's lobby that tried to draw attention to what was happening in the Parliamentary Assembly. A report entitled "Prostitution—which stance to take?" seems to recommend exactly the opposite of what we discussed in the previous parliamentary session. I understand now that the Parliamentary Assembly is not the European Parliament, but it still affects people's lives hugely. The Parliamentary Assembly is trying to differentiate between prostitution through trafficking, which it calls enforced prostitution, and prostitution that it calls a lifestyle choice. It does not look like we would agree with the findings, basically.

It is amazing how many things like that go on and we need to be in at the beginning to ensure that we put across our point of view.

Sandra White: It is vital for the Parliament to have close liaison with Europe. Given that equal opportunities issues are at the forefront of the Parliament's work, I imagine that we will have something to offer some of the European institutions' committees; I leave it up to the convener and the clerks to decide which ones we should contact. It is important that we make such links.

I echo what Marlyn Glen said. There are many initiatives at European level to which the British Government has not signed up, but to which I would like it to sign up, for example on immigration and asylum issues. It is a good idea to have close liaison with Europe and I look forward to our first such meeting.

The Convener: Do members agree to invite the Scottish Parliament's European officer to give us a scene-setting briefing on the current equal opportunities issues at EU level, which will include an overview of the part that the relevant institutions play?

Members *indicated agreement*.

The Convener: That is great.

I remind broadcasting and any members of the public who are present that we will now move into private session for agenda items 6 and 7.

11:20

Meeting continued in private until 12:05.

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