

EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE

Tuesday 26 February 2008

Session 3

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EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE

3rd Meeting 2008, 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

THE FOLLOWING GAVE EVIDENCE:

Victoria Beattie (Scottish Government Lifelong Learning Directorate)

Liz Catterson (Scottish Government Lifelong Learning Directorate)

Joseph Dowd (Scottish Government Lifelong Learning Directorate)

Fiona Hyslop (Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Terry Shevlin

ASSISTANT CLERK

Roy McMahon

LOCATION

Committee Room 1

Scottish Parliament

Equal Opportunities Committee

Tuesday 26 February 2008

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 10:30*]

Disability Inquiry

The Convener (Margaret Mitchell): Good morning and welcome to the third meeting in 2008 of the Equal Opportunities Committee. I give a special welcome to Jamie Probert, who is sitting in on the meeting. Jamie is a pupil at Craigmount high school in Edinburgh, and is gaining work experience with Mark Ewing of the Scottish Parliament's official report. He is accompanied by Colin Hutchison, who is his carer. I hope that both of you enjoy the meeting. Members have promised to be on their best behaviour for you, Jamie.

Hugh O'Donnell (Central Scotland) (LD): Do not believe that, Jamie.

The Convener: I remind everyone present, including members, that mobile phones and BlackBerrys should be switched off completely, as they interfere with the sound system even when they are switched to silent.

The first agenda item is to take evidence from the Scottish Government on the implementation of the recommendations in our predecessor committee's disability inquiry report, entitled "Removing Barriers and Creating Opportunities". I am delighted to welcome to the meeting the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning, Fiona Hyslop. She is supported by Victoria Beattie, Liz Catterson and Joseph Dowd, who are Scottish Government officials. I invite her to make a brief opening statement before committee members ask questions.

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning (Fiona Hyslop): Thank you, convener. I am pleased to have the opportunity to provide to the committee an update on how the Scottish Government is progressing with the recommendations in the disability inquiry report that was produced by the previous Equal Opportunities Committee. I understand that the committee will hear from a number of ministers and cabinet secretaries, who will address aspects of the report and points that were made in it.

The inquiry covered important areas in which the Government has high priorities. As members know, we have five strategic priorities: to make Scotland safer and stronger, smarter, healthier, wealthier and fairer, and greener. It is clear that

we cannot deliver on those priorities unless we take steps to ensure that everyone in Scotland's diverse communities can benefit from the work that we are taking forward. By getting things right in colleges and universities, we can ensure that more people develop the qualities and skills that they need for life and work. We can achieve that by creating opportunities for people who previously may not have been able to access continuing education or to enter employment. We can also improve the support that we provide to disabled people who are studying in our colleges and universities or are in work.

"Skills for Scotland: A Lifelong Skills Strategy" states at its beginning that it sets out

"our ambitions for skills, in a lifelong learning context, from cradle to grave",

and that the skills strategy has

"the promotion of equality of opportunity and the elimination of discrimination at its core."

The skills strategy is a framework that shows how all the constituent parts of our education and learning systems can contribute as one learning system towards giving Scotland a world-class skills base. We aim to recognise people's different needs, situations and goals, and to remove the barriers that limit what people can do.

In looking to the future, I acknowledge what has already been put in place to help people with disabilities to have greater choice and to improve support throughout their post-school education and into employment, and I am keen to ensure that we build on the good things that have already been achieved. Our colleges and universities have a history of supporting a diverse student population, and our student support arrangements take account of the additional needs of students with disabilities. A range of allowances is available to support students in their studies and to ensure that disabled students are not disadvantaged.

I accept that more can always be done, and the Government is committed to developing our policies to continue to tackle the barriers that students face. One way in which we are working towards achieving that aim is through the disabled students stakeholder group, which is led by officials from the Government's Lifelong Learning Directorate. That group considers and addresses issues and barriers relating to the support that is available to learners with disability-related additional needs in colleges and universities.

Key stakeholders and delivery partners are members of that group. As a result of their feedback, we are undertaking a review of the disabled students allowance for higher education students. The information that will be gathered during the review will help us to consider ways in which the allowance could be improved and better

targeted to benefit the educational experience of disabled learners. The initial evidence has helped influence the Government's decision to increase the threshold for the non-medical personal helpers allowance in the DSA. From next academic year—2008-09—eligible students who require non-medical personal help will benefit from an increased allowance of up to £20,000. That 60 per cent increase will make a significant difference to the educational experience of many disabled students.

It is vital that disabled people can access the learning that is most appropriate to their needs. In further education we have a combination of mainstream and specialist provision, which allows people to choose provision that matches their needs and aspirations. We continue to work closely with the Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council, which might have reported separately to the committee, and with the sector to ensure that that continues to happen. College and university principals have a keen interest in this agenda.

"Workforce Plus: an Employability Framework for Scotland" looks to devolved policies and services such as health and social care, training and skills development and regeneration to make a significant contribution to disabled individuals' employment prospects. Community planning partnerships are rising to the challenge of workforce plus. Those partnerships will ensure that different local agencies work together and are clear about their roles and responsibilities in helping all people get back to work. It will not surprise members to hear that recent figures estimate that only 10 per cent of people with a learning disability are in employment. That is a key area to tackle. In recognition of that, a learning disabilities co-ordinator has been appointed under workforce plus to work with community planning partnerships and help them progress their work on employability for people with learning disabilities.

We have also commissioned the Scottish Development Centre for Mental Health to support workforce plus partnerships locally and nationally. I am keen to pursue the agenda of supporting people with mental health problems in taking up employment opportunities.

We worked with the Scottish Union for Supported Employment to develop a blueprint for supported employment. We recognised that quality standards are an important component of that and we are working with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities on how to proceed.

Accessing further and higher education and developing new skills are critical not only for personal and social reasons—Scotland's shared future economic success will depend on our entire workforce having the skills needed to secure

employment. There is always more we can do. We in the new Government are committed to developing our policies in partnership with people with disabilities. I am keen that we make progress with the committee's recommendations and continue to break down the barriers that people with disabilities face.

The Convener: Thank you for that comprehensive and detailed opening statement, which helps put today's evidence session in context.

I want to start by asking you about current service provision and funding. You will recall that there was concern about that and that recommendation 11 in the report stated:

"short-term funding and postcode lottery of support mechanisms to obtain employment for disabled people should be replaced by a strategic and co-ordinated approach with long-term funding".

What progress has the Government made in relation to funding streams? Do you have any plans for improvements in this area?

Fiona Hyslop: There has been movement in that area. The Government has moved to identify and secure strategic funding, as set out in recommendation 11, and to take a co-ordinated approach to long-term funding.

Members might be aware that we have brought together a number of funding streams that were allocated to this area. Workforce plus funding; more choices, more chances funding for those not in education, employment or training; working for families funding; and community regeneration funding have all been brought together into the fairer Scotland fund, which will enable community planning partnerships to exercise greater flexibility. The idea is that if you want to be strategic, you have to have the flexibility to deliver.

We have set high-level priorities for community planning partnerships around regeneration for the most disadvantaged communities, improving the life chances of individual groups that are experiencing poverty, and improving employability—particularly among young people and other hard-to-reach groups. I expect this approach to create more opportunities for people with disabilities to get work, which is one of the longer-term priorities.

The role of community planning partnerships will become increasingly important. I stress that my interest is to help in particular those with mental health problems. The role of community planning partnerships will become increasingly important because they bring together health, social work, education and the new skills body that is being set up, to work together with Jobcentre Plus locally.

We recognise that securing single outcome agreements with individual councils this April will

be key in moving services forward, but I stress that just as important will be the single outcome agreements that we understand all community planning partnerships will be able to sign next April—that is a key area. The next year will be critical in securing in those single outcome agreements with community planning partnerships the things that we want to achieve, which should deliver recommendation 11 from the committee's report.

The Convener: Thank you. That is encouraging, minister.

Hugh O'Donnell: Thank you, cabinet secretary. You mentioned the DSA and made specific reference to higher education. Can you please clarify what the position is with regard to that type of support in further education?

Fiona Hyslop: Okay. As I said, one of the things that we are doing is reviewing the disabled students allowance generally to ensure that we have equity in the system and that what is required can be provided. Certainly, the non-medical help extension has been supported, and there is good practice in a number of colleges and HE institutions.

The point is that improving the DSA will enable stakeholders and, indeed, all those involved with the SFC to see where we need to go forward if we want improvements. If the committee is concerned about the situation in FE and wants to improve it, it is important that it lets us know. However, we must build in flexibility for colleges in the system as well because we can sometimes get better solutions from things that individual colleges want to do, although those must be done within the framework. That is why the review is becoming increasingly important.

Hugh O'Donnell: Finally, do we have a timeframe for completion of the review? As you will be aware, students will be making applications in the not-too-distant future.

Victoria Beattie (Scottish Government Lifelong Learning Directorate): The review is due to be completed in time for the next academic year, when the Student Awards Agency for Scotland puts out its student support; so the recommendations will be given at the start of the 2008-09 academic year. However, we obviously know that we cannot resolve everything, so we hope to put recommendations up to ministers and make changes to the SAAS guidance for 2008-09.

Marlyn Glen (North East Scotland) (Lab): I welcome the review of the disabled students allowance. However, I want a bit more reassurance on what you said about bringing the funding streams together and about the importance of local community planning partnerships. If all those things come together and

there is a single outcome agreement, the worry is that, unless the position of disabled people is put up front, they will be right at the back of the queue. Can you give a bit more reassurance on that?

Fiona Hyslop: I am confident that that will not happen, but it will take political leadership from everybody to ensure that it does not; it will take political leadership from the Government and from the democratically elected councils that will be involved. That is why we have employment issues—I am sure that we will come on to them—in the national framework that we are developing with COSLA. It is essential that we ensure that those are given political priority. I can give that assurance from the national Government's perspective.

Only last week I was in Alloa on a connected matter—the number of young people not in education, employment or training with disabilities and the question of how we tackle that problem and support those people. As you will know from the inquiry report, transition is one of the key areas for support. In connection with that, we have announced funding of £3 million a year for post-school psychological services. That is a key area in which we can see the community planning partnerships coming together because of the support that is provided in colleges. It is about helping young people to progress. Clearly, many of those youngsters also need support from other services in health and social work, so things are moving and not just standing still. I can give you our commitment on that, and we are working closely with COSLA in that area. I have regular meetings with the children and education spokesperson from COSLA.

Similarly, those who have responsibility for supported employment will take the matter forward by asking how the national framework will be implemented. A draft of that framework has been agreed with COSLA. It is not ready to be issued, but we are developing it.

Marlyn Glen is right to identify the issue, but we should ask what positive action we can take rather than assume that the worst will happen.

10:45

Marlyn Glen: There is still a feeling that, despite the disability inquiry and the response to it, nothing much has happened so far, so I will push you on timescales. I am glad that your discussions with COSLA on the matter are continuing and that there is a draft report. Is there a timescale for its publication?

Joseph Dowd (Scottish Government Lifelong Learning Directorate): We would like to set up a task force in April with a view to completing the report and getting some action for next year.

Fiona Hyslop: The discussions have been on-going. There has been a bit of a hiatus with the new team at COSLA and the new Government coming in.

Marlyn Glen: We expect a hiatus, but there is concern.

Fiona Hyslop: The draft report was produced in, I think, November last year and the committee has started to assess progress since then. The report is almost finalised and can be taken forward. However, it requires political leadership, which is one of the things that we want the task force to do. We would like to provide the Equal Opportunities Committee with an opportunity to be involved in that. If it is appropriate, we will write to the convener to say what involvement the committee can have. You might want to ensure that you help to provide the political leadership—it is not only the Government and COSLA that can do that. The Parliament's scrutiny and monitoring through the committee are crucial, and the committee might want to take up the opportunity to be involved in the task force.

The Convener: That would be helpful. We will take you up on the offer.

Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP): The cabinet secretary mentioned the draft report. The committee had asked that a report be finalised by the end of 2007 but, if I am correct in my understanding of what Mr Dowd said, a draft report will be available in April 2008 and ready for publication in 2009.

Joseph Dowd: Sorry—no.

Sandra White: Will you clarify?

Joseph Dowd: The draft report is nearly finalised and we should get agreement on it over the next couple of weeks. We hope to set up the task force in April so that the work that we need to do to take forward the supported employment model will be in place for next year.

Sandra White: Would the committee or others be able to have an input into that?

Fiona Hyslop: That is what I just said.

Sandra White: I just wanted to clarify that point.

Fiona Hyslop: The timeframe might have come adrift by a couple of months but, to be fair to COSLA, it is a reasonable timeframe, bearing in mind all that has happened recently, not least the introduction of the concordat. We aim to finalise the report, publish it in the spring and then set up the task force, which will be about the implementation.

You ask about the committee's involvement. There is an important role for the committee in the task force as part of your continuing scrutiny of

what is happening. It is also about showing political commitment, which was Marlyn Glen's point, and the committee can also provide that input.

The Convener: Staying with current service provision, I will ask about time-limited support. You have indicated that flexibility is built into the employment support mechanisms to ensure that disabled people enter and remain in work. You mentioned the co-ordinator and funding. It was the view of the previous Deputy Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning that workforce plus would solve the problem. Are you satisfied that it is now effectively delivering the flexibility that is required to ensure that disabled people not only enter but remain in employment?

Fiona Hyslop: Yes—but more can be done and experiences throughout the country probably vary. In Clackmannan last week, it was clear to me that partnership working has led to effective delivery. I expect that skills development Scotland—the new agency that is being developed for learning, skills and training in Scotland—will take a keen interest in the matter.

I should also point out that Anne McGuire, the Westminster minister for disabled people, launched a review of disability employment programmes recently—I think it was last month. I launched it with her as a signal that we want to work together, with Jobcentre Plus and the Department for Work and Pensions, to ensure that we work to best effect. If we can get workforce plus and the Scottish arm—with the devolved responsibility for co-ordination of health and social work—working more closely with Jobcentre Plus on the reserved issues of employment, we will have opportunities, with the community planning partnerships, to make things work better.

I am satisfied with progress so far, but I do not want to rest at this stage.

The Convener: You are not complacent.

Fiona Hyslop: We expect to see further improvement.

The Convener: That is good.

Elaine Smith (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab): On service provision, you mentioned working with the Department for Work and Pensions and the new agency, and you mentioned training. My first question is on residential training. The previous Equal Opportunities Committee was concerned that disabled people in Scotland had to travel to England to get training that would meet their needs. It recommended that the Scottish Executive consider that as a matter of urgency. Will the new agency consider provision of residential training in Scotland? What developments have there been? Will disabled

Scots still have to travel to England for residential training?

Fiona Hyslop: The report asked the previous Government to consider that as a matter of urgency, and it had started to do that. Rocket Science (UK) Ltd was commissioned to look into residential training in Scotland and it published its report in March 2007. It stated that many professionals who work with people with disabilities feel strongly that residential training should not exist for people with disabilities. The argument is that residential training opportunities are deeply artificial and are segregated.

There is, I suppose, a philosophical issue that has to be addressed with the stakeholder community. How appropriate is it for support and training to be separated from people's own experiences? Should we ensure that we have higher standards of integration in mainstream training provision? There is an issue about whether it is more appropriate to build capacity in mainstream provision than it is to build new residential training centres in Scotland, which would be separate and segregated. The Government carried out a review, as the previous committee requested, but the recommendation that came back was that residential training might not be the most appropriate way forward.

We need to improve provision, and the funding council has commissioned the BRITE—Beattie resources for inclusiveness in technology and education—initiative to undertake a mapping study to examine whether we need further education provision, particularly for young people with complex needs. However, the research that the previous Government was asked to carry out, which was published just before we came into power, made it clear that residential training would not be appropriate. I suspect that the committee will want to reflect on that.

I presume that the report that was produced in March 2007 could and should be shared with the committee. However, what it says might not be what you want to hear, or what the previous committee expected. There is a serious issue about whether we, as a country, should state clearly that we expect all training providers to provide mainstream funding and mainstream training support for people with disabilities. Alternatively, we could give up on that, accept that they cannot do that and ensure that residential training is provided.

Elaine Smith: I think that the committee will want more information on that. The recommendation was clearly that residential training should be provided in Scotland so that people do not have to travel down to England. I am not saying that this is the case, but the previous committee raised the issue and asked for

more residential training to be provided in Scotland, and rather than that training being provided, we seem to have a report that says, "Well, actually, that's not the right way forward." You will understand that there will be worries about that, whether or not it is just a funding issue.

Fiona Hyslop: Yes. I will ask my officials to comment, but recommendation 13 states:

"The Committee recommends that the Scottish Executive considers this situation as a matter of urgency and looks forward to hearing from the Deputy Minister on this important issue".

The recommendation was from the previous committee to the previous Government, which commissioned a report that was published in March 2007. I am merely reporting what happened. The issue remains, but we cannot ignore that report, for which the committee asked.

Victoria Beattie: We commissioned BRITE to undertake a mapping exercise so that we can better understand what provision is available. The likes of Elmwood College have some residential provision, but we need a mapping study to drill down into and understand the issues that face parents who decide to send a child to England rather than to a local college. We need more evidence and better understanding, which is why we commissioned BRITE to do that mapping exercise and to ask schoolteachers and parents why those decisions are made.

Fiona Hyslop: The committee might be interested to know that the Department for Work and Pensions has evaluated the service that its residential training unit provides and might want to contact the DWP for further information about what it is doing.

Elaine Smith: Convener, as the issue has been flagged up, the committee might want to have an additional evidence session on it, once the Scottish Government has provided the further information.

Joseph Dowd: The review of the DWP's residential training unit said that the quality of training is good and that staff are committed to trainees, but that courses have limited currency and success and that few people have moved into work as a result of them. The training and the environment are good, but the outcomes are poor in comparison with what would be expected. That is another point to consider.

Fiona Hyslop: I am interested in what the committee will do after making its assessment.

The Convener: Once we have all the evidence, we will decide on a way forward—whether to have more evidence sessions or to take another approach. We will certainly not let the issue rest as it is.

Elaine Smith: The previous Administration's response to recommendation 18—that the public sector should set an example in employment of disabled people—was that it would examine how its human resource processes could be improved. What progress has been made since we received that response? Has any attempt been made, as suggested by recommendation 19, to co-ordinate the inclusion of that work in the action plans that the Scottish Government and its agencies have prepared for the disability equality duty?

Fiona Hyslop: As an employer, we continue to discharge our responsibilities under the Jobcentre Plus's positive about disabled people scheme, and the Government's disability equality scheme, and to ensure that other public sector employers develop and share best practice. The Government has targeted internal and external opportunities that are relevant to members of the disability network. For this year's Government employee survey, the Government contacted network members individually to ensure that they were aware of the survey and of the assistance that is available to complete it. The results of that survey will be analysed by equality strands, which will include disability.

Several practices that could be used as exemplars are in place. The new electronic human resources system should allow easier and more extensive reporting on several diversity issues, which will include disability. A voluntary diversity objective was introduced in the new performance appraisal system and will be mandatory for all staff from April 2008. A quarterly diversity newsletter is issued to raise awareness. A diversity section that provides disability information is on the Government's relaunched intranet site and a range of awareness-raising events have been held. Several process and policy reviews have taken place, including the resourcing review. That all relates to recommendation 18.

As for recommendation 19, the Government's disability equality scheme was published in December 2006, and its first annual report was published in December 2007. That underlines the Government's mainstreaming commitment. The disability equality duty also requires ministers to publish a report in December 2008 that will set out progress and where the public sector is going. The first annual report, which was published in 2007, and the 2008 report will provide an ideal opportunity to consider progress.

The Government is certainly aware of its various duties and responsibilities, which include gathering information from other areas of the public sector. A number of things that have been set in train are starting to deliver in that respect.

11:00

Elaine Smith: That is good news. We look forward to seeing that report when it becomes available.

Supported employment, which you mentioned, is extremely important. However, under recommendation 21, the committee suggested that to increase employer awareness and raise young disabled people's confidence,

“the Scottish Executive should examine options for increasing school-age work experience and the promotion of a job-trial approach for young disabled people whilst at school”.

What work has been done in that regard?

Fiona Hyslop: There are two main strands to this issue. First, I hope that the committee is aware of the curriculum for excellence, which is a major revamp and modernisation of the Scottish school curriculum; draft outcomes for different subject areas have already been delivered. Under that new curriculum, young people will have greater opportunities to learn skills for life and skills for work; after all, the context in which learning takes place is just as important as the content. By focusing less on narrow academic areas, this approach should provide all children with greater experience of how to learn and, I hope, energise teachers and make subjects more exciting and interesting. I am keen to make vocational experience available to all children; indeed, improving on that is one of the outcomes that are made clear in the concordat.

A major issue with regard to work experience is the need for greater employer engagement in showing pupils the world of work. The question is whether in these modern days work experience in general is fit for purpose and whether the traditional week away is relevant any more. As a result, we are reviewing the whole issue of work experience and, as a result of recommendation 21, we have made a commitment to examine how children and young people with disabilities can be better supported in that respect and how we can ensure that they have better work experience.

We need to enliven work experience. As I have said, the big task in that respect is to engage employers. However, the new curriculum for excellence will provide more opportunities and I am committed to ensuring not only that there is more employer engagement but that work experience is fit for purpose for all young people. The approach might be a bit different from the old days when fourth-year pupils had a week of work experience, and the question is whether it should be spread over the year or take place, for example, during the summer holidays. In any case, if we base work experience on individual

needs, we will be more sensitive to its appropriateness for young people with disabilities.

You are right to suggest that work experience is about raising pupils' confidence and giving them experiences and, with more constructive employer engagement, we should have a great opportunity in that respect. However, I believe that this is a two-way process: by becoming more aware of the challenges and, more important, the opportunities that are presented by bringing young people with disabilities into the workforce, employers themselves should gain a lot. Indeed, by using, for example, modern developments such as Glow, which is the internet vehicle for sharing best practice among schools, employers will be able to share with others best practice in effective ways of providing work experience for young people with disabilities. Again, this is work in progress.

Elaine Smith: A job-trial approach would also let employers see what they would be missing if they discriminated against a certain section of the population.

Fiona Hyslop: I think that this is also about maximising individuals' potential, but I agree that we need to give employers the opportunity to see what they might gain from taking a wider perspective on the people whom they employ.

Sandra White: Recommendations 24 and 25 refer to the establishment of a national framework for supported employment. You mentioned the draft proposals that have been sent out for consultation and the COSLA situation in that regard. What work has been done on the "central funding and management" and "national standards" that are mentioned in recommendation 24?

Fiona Hyslop: That is a big area that the committee identified in its inquiry and on which it made recommendations on how progress should be made. The whole range of its recommendations on the national framework is important, but recommendations 24 and 29 are especially important. The committee recommended that the Government should establish a national framework for supported employment, which should take account of a variety of areas. Our continuing work with COSLA has been crucial in that regard. I would like to be able to give the committee a copy of the framework now, but I cannot. We must respect COSLA's sensitivities in the timing of our release of that document and work with COSLA to ensure that it is content with what it contains. In April, the task force will proceed with its work.

National standards are an issue, and we need to ensure that referral involves proper assessment. In relation to job description issues, we should remember that the new skills training agency,

skills development Scotland, will include Careers Scotland staff. I think that the committee has had correspondence from Careers Scotland, which has taken forward its commitment to address some of the key action points in the committee's recommendations.

One of the committee's recommendations concerned the development of pilot projects on supported employment throughout Scotland. We have established that there is not such a great need for pilots because a large number of projects are already in existence. The feedback has been that, rather than pilot new projects, we should share existing best practice and ensure that it is extended, so there will be less emphasis on piloting and more emphasis on ensuring that the standards issue is dealt with. The committee recommended that pilot projects should be evaluated after two years, with a view to rolling out a national framework. We have considered that recommendation.

The workforce plus team has been working with the Scottish Union of Supported Employment and COSLA on the framework. We must also work closely with the DWP. I have met David Lammy, who is the Minister for Skills, twice and I met Caroline Flint before she moved on from the DWP. I am keen for us to have close co-operation with the DWP because we face key issues and challenges. It might be possible for us to get prime contracts for Jobcentre Plus on a Scotland-wide basis, and disability and supported employment could be considered as part of the review that Anne McGuire launched. As that would provide us with a great deal more flexibility, it is an aspect that we want to develop. Quality standards will also be crucial, so it is important that we get them right.

Sandra White: We are talking about one of the most important aspects of helping disabled people into work. You will see from the recommendations in the report that the committee felt that because workforce plus was targeted at new incapacity benefit claimants and applied to only seven areas of Scotland, there was a gap and a lack of joined-up thinking on how to help disabled people to make progress. That is where we thought that the national framework would come in. You mentioned the skills strategy. Will that involve partnership working with workforce plus to bridge the gap that disabled people fall through and the lack of continuity?

Fiona Hyslop: I will begin the answer, before asking officials to comment. The fairer Scotland fund allows all the funding for different areas to be put together. Previously, as you correctly identify, workforce plus was targeted at seven areas, as was the funding for investment in young people who were not in employment, education or

training. The fact that the fairer Scotland fund, which brings together other aspects of community regeneration, is now available to all local authorities will ensure that there is a spread in the availability of fairer Scotland funding throughout Scotland.

We should bear in mind that the allocation of the fairer Scotland fund was tightly focused on areas of deprivation and poverty, such as Dundee, East Ayrshire and North Ayrshire, which I visited as part of the more choices, more chances agenda. Because of the levels of deprivation in those areas, they will receive a healthy allocation from the fund.

Skills development Scotland will work as a large agency across different areas. It will bring together learndirect Scotland, Careers Scotland and some skills aspects of Scottish Enterprise and Highlands and Islands Enterprise, and work with local training agencies. That co-ordination will be critical. The idea is to align people and agencies rather than to separate them out. I think that it will make a big difference.

Liz Catterson (Scottish Government Lifelong Learning Directorate): Some of the work that we have shared with our colleagues in the development of the new skills agency has involved the management of information under workforce plus. People often get lost in the transition from training to employment, and we need to consider client tracking and how to ensure that people are not lost in the system. We are sharing some of that information with our colleagues to ensure that we are learning together around the interfaces. People do not want to go between agencies. They want to make progress, and we need to ensure that there is a clear transitional path for them.

Sandra White: I am grateful for the response from the cabinet secretary, and to hear what is going on with COSLA. My big worry is that, because the DWP and workforce plus are involved, we will not have enough input to ensure that the gap is closed and that there is a national strategy for disabled people so that they do not lose out. As the cabinet secretary said, money will be targeted to areas of deprivation, but disabled people who live outwith those areas should get the same deal. I am concerned about the community planning partnerships having enough funds and experience to roll out a project of that magnitude. I would like some reassurance that that can happen and that our recommendations can be implemented.

Fiona Hyslop: There has clearly been movement. The national framework will exist, and rather than have pilots, we want to roll out best practice and to benchmark against European standards. It will be a case not of having small pilots that can then be rolled out, but of

recognising that a lot of activity exists already and benchmarking at a high level so that we can ensure probably a faster roll-out than was anticipated in the original report and recommendations.

We have an opportunity to provide exactly what the committee asked for. There will be one strategy and the clout of one organisation. The critical mass in bringing together skills development Scotland should not be underestimated for how we can work on a strategic basis with the DWP to ensure that we have national responsiveness for national training programmes. That is exactly what we will ask skills development Scotland to examine. The link will be on how that makes a difference on the ground for people in local areas.

I cannot speak for the new minister in the DWP, but I know that Caroline Flint was very interested in the health aspects—she was previously a health minister—and how we can ensure that there is enough flexibility in individual jobcentres. We should also be looking at city partnerships. When I visited people working in the city partnership in Dundee, for example, they made it clear to me that they had expected 60 per cent of the people with whom they would work to have some mental health issues. In fact, they found that the percentage was higher.

That involves a wider employability agenda, but there is a big issue about how we can have both flexibility in the Jobcentre Plus provision and a national strategy provided by skills development Scotland. The contact and communication among the health service, social workers and education and training providers and within community planning partnerships will be as important. That is the big opportunity, and that is why the content of the community planning partnerships single outcome agreements next April will be critical.

Marlyn Glen: I will move on to access to further and higher education and recommendation 36. The committee expressed concern that the previous Administration's lifelong learning strategy had made

"little or no reference to disabled people"

and recommended that service provision to disabled people should be highlighted specifically, along with targets and implementation mechanisms, in any future update of the strategy.

The Scottish Government's lifelong skills strategy, which was published in September 2007, similarly makes little reference to service provision to disabled people. How will you ensure that the strategy will deliver effectively for disabled people?

11:15

Fiona Hyslop: First, on the lifelong learning consultation, the previous Government conducted a review from November 2006 to February 2007; 112 responses were received, including one from the Disability Rights Commission and one from Deafblind Scotland. That helped to inform the skills strategy, "Skills for Scotland". The skills strategy is what it says on the tin—a strategy. It contains challenges for different agencies on how they deliver provision. We made clear at the outset, as we were asked to do by the Equal Opportunities Committee, the disability and equality strands within that.

You are right to identify the issue as crucial. We have talked about the work experience of young people in schools. It is about what happens in schools and colleges, but it is also about progression and transition. It is not only about staying at college; it is about progression into supported employment.

A key driver in the skills strategy is the individual learner. That is probably what distinguishes the approach in Scotland from the analysis of skills and training in England, which is led completely by employer demand. We recognise that individuals are often best placed to identify where they want to move on to. We must reward and incentivise colleges and organisations that provide supported employment. It is not only about what you do and the quality of what you provide when somebody is with you: it is about the support that you give them to move on and the transition. That is the philosophy behind the skills strategy, which lends itself to meeting the needs of people who have particular challenges. The skills strategy makes it clear that that is the case.

Michael McMahon (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab): Inclusion Scotland has done some work on the NEET category as it affects disabled young people. It made the point that a disabled young person at the age of 16 is twice as likely to be in the NEET category. As young disabled people move from 16 to 19, they are disproportionately represented in further education, but by the age of 19 they are three times more likely to be in the NEET category. You mentioned that you were doing some work on the more choices, more chances strategy. What work is being done within that strategy to ensure that the voice of young disabled people is heard, so that their inability to get into training and education is addressed?

Fiona Hyslop: That issue is crucial. One reason why we wanted to stop describing people as NEETs is that, if we wait until young people are not in education, employment or training, it is often too late—as is shown by the statistics that you mentioned. The statistics show that at the age of

16 a young person with disabilities is more likely not to be in education, employment or training, and that at the age of 17 or 18—within a couple of years—the proportion of them in that situation has increased rapidly. The philosophy is about people having more chances and more choices earlier.

I was a member of the Education Committee when it considered the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004. The committee persuaded the Government to extend the transition preparation time from six months to 12 months because, as I said in response to Marlyn Glen, it is necessary to get the transitions and progressions right.

I want support to be provided for all groups of young people long before they reach 16. My announcement in Alloa was clear. The transition funding in post-school psychological services was pioneered in Clackmannanshire. Only about half the local authorities had those services, but the announcement of £3 million a year means that all local authorities will have them. The services are provided to support the transition and to ensure that there are ways for young people to progress.

I was in Forth Valley College in Alloa last week. That is one of the seven areas on which we are concentrating the more choices, more chances agenda. All the people who are involved were there, including someone who worked with young offenders, and people from Jobcentre Plus and Careers Scotland. People were there from all the different agencies that we need to bring together. I went to provide the political leadership that I think you are looking for, and to say that we think that the agenda matters. As cabinet secretary, I think that it matters.

Young people with disabilities are a crucial group of people. We cannot treat all young people who are not in education, employment or training as one group. Looked-after children, for instance, have specific challenges, which need to be supported. Transition support is critical. I return to Sandra White's point about supported employment thereafter: there is no reason not to share the best examples that exist. I was very impressed by the enthusiasm and confidence of the young people in that category whom I met, as well as their expectation of moving on. It is important for them to have somewhere to move on to, where they will be supported. That confidence and support for people who, for a variety of reasons, might feel vulnerable and isolated, demonstrates the sort of best practice that I would like to be shared.

I hope that you can see my commitment in this critical area. That sort of work should be driven forward in all seven NEET areas, as they were previously called—that is a focus of our support. I refer to the work that is going on in Irvine and North Ayrshire; Maureen Watt is going to Dundee

for precisely the same reason. If we get all the players who are working in this area together in one room—as we are—and if we put our political emphasis here, especially on young people with disabilities, as we did last week, I hope that it shows you our commitment to support that group of people in particular.

Michael McMahon: That is helpful.

You mentioned the importance of community planning partnerships. One of the recommendations of the committee's report related to "Partnership Matters", which brought together all the agencies involved, including health boards and local authorities. As you have said, they are vital for taking the agenda forward.

Fiona Hyslop: Exactly.

Michael McMahon: The work had to be extended to get young people into universities. How has that recommendation been addressed?

Fiona Hyslop: That recommendation was important. "Partnership Matters" was refreshed in August 2007. We are in discussions with universities about how they can each apply the principles of "Partnership Matters". I have had a number of discussions with university principals. I was at the Glasgow School of Art yesterday, and I discussed its support for young people with disabilities with its director, Seona Reid, only yesterday afternoon. The subject comes up, and I ensure that I discuss it with principals when I see them. The recommendation was to extend "Partnership Matters". We are in discussion with universities to ensure that its principles can be explored with them. It is also about partnership working, and the fact that universities cannot see themselves in isolation. They have as much responsibility in this area as anybody else.

Michael McMahon: I appreciate that you are engaged in discussion with universities to ensure that they know their place in this regard. How will you evaluate and monitor the outcomes regarding disabled young people in order to show—physically—that universities are taking on board what you say?

Fiona Hyslop: The inspections by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education are critical in that regard, certainly for colleges extending their responsibilities. HMIE inspections are generally critical to the outcomes and indicators of the national framework for schools, and they are a useful monitoring tool for us. They also form a condition of funding. The Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council regularly issues guidance on how universities are expected to deliver. From my discussions with universities through the task force, I know that, while they definitely make an economic contribution, they also have a social responsibility; their

responsibilities are wider. We provide extensive public funding, so we can expect to get evidence of how universities are delivering in a number of areas. Although they are autonomous, independent institutions, we expect universities, for the amount of money that goes into them, to evidence movement and progress.

Bill Kidd (Glasgow) (SNP): The previous Administration's response to recommendation 43 was that it would evaluate the effectiveness of the lifelong partners strategy in 2008-09. Is it still your intention to conduct such an evaluation? If so, what might the timescale be for your reporting back on that?

Fiona Hyslop: We must reflect on the fact that discussions and arrangements and the relationship with local government have changed substantially since the committee first produced its report. We want to ensure that vocational learning is reviewed, because it is one of the key areas in the recommendation on lifelong partners. Access to vocational learning is one of the 12 specified commitments in the concordat with COSLA and we expect those opportunities to be shared widely.

Membership of the school-college stakeholder forum, which is chaired by Maureen Watt, the Minister for Schools and Skills, includes Skill Scotland, the National Bureau for Students with Disabilities. That might be the appropriate vehicle through which to make progress.

The funding council has commissioned HMIE to review school-college partnerships to make recommendations for improvement and practice. That review should be published by the end of April 2008—I do not know how long the committee's inquiry will take, but a number of things will develop in April. The review will include the interests of disabled learners. HMIE will include one special school in its review and report on a number of additional special needs programmes. That progress to date might be a useful way to analyse what was behind recommendation 43.

Bill Kidd: Recommendation 45, which relates to careers advice and guidance, states:

"Scottish Ministers should rectify the lack of careers guidance to young disabled people in schools ... by developing a programme of training, including appropriate standards, for those providing such guidance."

Have you made any moves on that recommendation and if so, have you tapped into the expertise of such bodies as Inclusion Scotland and the Glasgow Disability Alliance? What further progress can you report to the committee?

Fiona Hyslop: This is a critical area, which goes back to the point about opportunities for progress. It is not about the experience that people get in

schools or wherever they are; it is about having opportunities to go forward.

In bringing Careers Scotland into skills development Scotland, one of the things that we want to do is to align it more closely with schools generally. Careers Scotland is refocusing key aspects of its business to enhance universal provision and targeted support. We need to consider our expectations of Careers Scotland in providing more universal support for everybody. Should we say to it, "We want you to be more targeted at those young people who, for a variety of reasons, have particular challenges and bias to overcome"? That is one of the points that I want skills development Scotland to bottom out.

The previous Government made it clear that it wanted to ensure that everybody who left school at 16 had an exit interview; that was part of Careers Scotland's previous refocusing exercise, but there is an issue about whether Careers Scotland's universal support should be pushed further down into early years education. The argument about giving people more choices, more chances earlier on rather than waiting until they are in a difficult position lends itself to saying that we need Careers Scotland's work to be better integrated earlier in someone's school career. Several questions arise. What should the Careers Scotland advisers deliver? What can and should happen with the revamped curriculum for excellence? Should there be more employer engagement with teachers and should teachers be able to raise aspirations and opportunities and give students a window on what might be available, but earlier in their school years? I will not say to you that that is my vision of what it should look like; the challenge is how we make it happen.

If we were to take such a general approach to universal careers guidance, that would enable Careers Scotland to target more precisely—I think that this was a recommendation—young people with disabilities, looked-after children and those people who might need more support in making their choices, as opposed to offering a blanket general support. The previous committee wanted the approach to be more focused on targeted support. I will ensure that Careers Scotland, within the new skills development agency, will develop such an approach.

You also asked about the input from different organisations in the refocusing of Careers Scotland's work. I cannot answer that at the moment, but I can certainly come back to the committee with information on whether Inclusion Scotland and other agencies that represent young people with disabilities were involved.

11:30

Bill Kidd: Nationally, the largest differences in employment rates are connected with whether people have qualifications. In 2003, 40 per cent of disabled people had no qualifications. The committee's report recommended that the Government should promote closer working relationships between schools and further and higher education providers to improve access to suitable information about the available opportunities. Are any pilots for that planned or in operation?

Fiona Hyslop: Much of that issue is about providing information and guidance on what is available and ensuring that colleges are sensitive and responsive to the needs of disabled students.

Under the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004, authorities are required to plan for transitions by ensuring that the young people are identified 12 months before they leave school and that information is exchanged with colleges six months beforehand. The operation of those provisions is better in some colleges than in others, although there are perhaps tensions in all colleges. It is probably right to suggest that we need pilots to ensure that best practice in the operation of the act is shared. Although the act applies to schools, it requires that there is active engagement between the college and the school six months before the young person with disabilities progresses to college. I understand that Adam Smith College and several other colleges are very good on that issue. We need to point out to the other colleges—this is where the report that the Scottish funding council commissioned from HMIE might be useful—examples of good practice and ensure that such practice becomes the standard across the piece.

Elaine Smith: What are the cabinet secretary's feelings on the provision of general education by the FE sector? Young people with dyslexia as well as others who lack confidence at school often find that an FE college is a better environment in which to pursue intermediate highers and access courses. I ask particularly in light of the suggestion by the principal of Coatbridge College that general education might be removed from FE. That suggestion worries me. I will write to the cabinet secretary on the issue, but I feel that it is important to raise the matter today because I think that, as a generality, FE has an important role in providing young people with the choice of studying access courses and highers in FE rather than staying on at school.

Fiona Hyslop: Before making my general point, I repeat that a key element in the schools strategy is that the individual who is progressing should be identified and that services should be tailored to the individual. Indeed, individual learning will

increasingly be expected in school education. That means personalised learning that is adapted to the individual.

A general issue that we need to consider—the school-college stakeholder forum that Maureen Watt chairs will have a critical role in this—is what education should be provided in schools and what education should be provided in FE. In a wider context, the recent report from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development—a study of Scottish education by international experts—challenged us about what is taught where. The report highlighted the lack of parity of esteem involved in the fact that vocational education is automatically taught outside schools. We need to ask what message that sends to young people about equity between academic and vocational education. I suggest that we perhaps need to rethink what is done in school and what is done in college.

During my recent visit to North Lanarkshire, I saw how Cardinal Newman high school, in partnership with Motherwell College, trains 14-year-olds how to work in the kitchen. They put on a fantastic provision—if local members have not visited the school, they must do so—and provided an excellent lunch. That demonstrates an important concept. If we are to create more space for people who—for exactly the reasons that Elaine Smith suggested—find college to be a more appropriate setting, we perhaps need to ensure that we can offer more college learning in schools to free up that space. That is exactly the type of debate that should be taking place in the school-college stakeholder forum. I will ask Maureen Watt to report on the progress of the forum.

There is an assumption that young people with dyslexia might want to go to college because school education is not as appropriate as it should be. That is why I met the First Minister and Sir Jackie Stewart over a month ago. The meeting brought together the deans of faculty of the seven teaching institutions to discuss the opportunity that is provided by training 20,000 new teachers to identify additional support for learning needs, such as dyslexia, and to create better learning opportunities for new teachers, so that when they go into schools they can identify and support dyslexia better than has been the case to date. If we do that throughout Scotland, and get all the deans of faculty working together, perhaps we will improve provision in schools for young people with dyslexia. They may still want to go to college—it may still be appropriate—but let us try to tackle some of the core problems, rather than just dealing with the consequences of difficulties. That is partly a general inquiry. We hope to expand it to other additional support for learning needs as part of comprehensive initial teacher training in future.

Elaine Smith: I hope that the convener will forgive me for mentioning the important “Dyslexia at Transition” DVD that was recently launched by Moray House school of education. Moray House hopes to get the DVD out to all Scottish schools by the summer. It deals with the transition from primary to secondary—perhaps the Government can tackle that issue too.

Fiona Hyslop: Absolutely. You are right. Although it is an exciting development to have 20,000 new teachers in training, the DVD helps to identify the support that is needed by teachers who are already in place. The idea of working with the deans of faculty is that the good work on the DVD from Moray House can be extended as part of continuing professional development. The work that has been done to help to develop better understanding in primary and secondary—it is not just about secondary—will be captured as part of initial teacher training. The modules that are produced collectively, in collaboration with all the institutions, can be used in CPD. I expect that the recently launched DVD will be an integral part of that.

The Convener: Your meeting with Jackie Stewart and the deans was very much welcomed by the cross-party group on dyslexia, which felt that it got to the heart of its concerns about whether dyslexia is dealt with efficiently in schools.

Bill Kidd: Role models are important to young people. Recommendation 48 was that

“research be carried out to examine the progress of disabled graduates, in the hope that this would identify positive examples and role models for schools and higher education providers to promote.”

At the end of last year, I attended an Equality Forward conference to promote its research, which showed that most universities were not particularly aware of the problems of disabled graduates when they employed those graduates. I am not sure that the universities are the best people to provide that sort of research. Are you aware of any other research in that field? If not, would you consider commissioning research?

Fiona Hyslop: Careers Scotland is reviewing service provision and the accessibility and appropriateness of services. Also, we are working with Young Scot on innovative ways of involving young people to develop an equality action plan. As part of that, we are looking at some of the progressions. Careers Scotland might be well placed to consider that. Bill Kidd is right about the important role that role models can play. However, there is also an issue about tracking. One of the areas of the Government’s research capability that it wants to improve is its work with universities to track sustainable employment and the type of jobs that graduates are in three years from graduation. It is quite difficult to do that, but we think that it is

important. People say X, Y and Z about the types of jobs that graduates go into, but if we can provide more robust tracking of graduates generally, we should also be able to identify where those with a disclosed disability are. Interestingly, you will see from some of the surveys that information about students who disclose a disability is increasingly being captured.

In my conversation with Seona Reid yesterday, it emerged that Glasgow School of Art has one of the higher percentages of students with disabilities. The difficulty that the art school has is that arts graduates and creative design people can often be very mobile. It is important that we encourage creative talents at Glasgow School of Art and other institutions. We must ensure that people with disabilities who are going places retain connections with universities, so that they can be role models, as part of the wider access agenda, if they choose.

You are right to say that a “do as I say” attitude is not enough; a “do as I do” approach is needed. We will expect universities, like other employers, to demonstrate best practice. Tracking graduates is difficult, but the disclosure of disabilities in applications may make it easier. Careers Scotland, working with skills development Scotland, will try to ensure that that happens. Our intention is clear from some of the indicators in the national framework. We want Scotland to be able to celebrate success wherever it is found but, for purely economic reasons, we also want to identify where our graduates are going. A robust system for doing that is needed. The current system is not as robust as it could be and we are working to improve it.

Hugh O'Donnell: You touched on two important issues relating to Learning and Teaching Scotland. There are anecdotal indications from service users that teachers may not be aware of the range of disabilities that are not manifest in physical appearance but which they may come across in the course of their teaching practice. To what extent should learning about such disabilities be part of teacher training? I understand that, at the moment, the special educational needs and additional support for learning modules in teacher training are optional rather than compulsory. Are there plans to change that?

Fiona Hyslop: I mentioned my recent meeting with the deans of the seven teaching institutions, which brought them together for the first time. Yesterday I was at Jordanhill, visiting the dean of the faculty of education of the University of Strathclyde. At my meeting with the deans, we discussed the template that we are using to improve initial teacher training on dyslexia. Training should not be optional and modules on additional support needs should be front loaded in

the training programme. Early intervention is important—analysis and diagnosis of additional support should take place early in a child's education. The deans have indicated that they will produce a module dealing with dyslexia. They also expect that training in additional support for learning will be provided at an earlier stage in the initial teacher training programme.

We intend to train 20,000 teachers to cover both the large number of retirements and our commitments on class sizes and other matters. Unlike the previous Government, we will not rely only on the one-year postgraduate course in teaching. We will also expand the four-year BEd course and encourage the University of Stirling and the Crichton campus to develop two-plus-two courses, which enable people to combine their teacher training with a speciality. The University of Aberdeen provides a two-plus-two course in liberal arts and teaching, so there is more flexibility in the modules that are available.

We are expanding the four-year BEd because there is concern that the timescale for the one-year postgraduate course is cramped. If we can get the seven deans to work together, we should be able to improve initial teacher training. The aim is first to produce an initial teacher training module on dyslexia that can be extended to CPD, and then to roll out modules in other areas of additional support for learning.

We can improve initial teacher training in additional support for learning, and I have taken action to make that happen. The roll-out that I have described will not happen overnight—we will start with dyslexia, for which there is an effective module. There is a lot of good practice—the issue is how we share it and ensure that there is best practice in all schools. We have a teaching population of 53,000 and plan to train 20,000 new teachers. That means that there will be a 40 per cent refresh of the teaching population within five years, which is a major development. We have an ideal opportunity to inject some vigour into the teaching of additional support for learning and to extend that to CPD programmes. I am optimistic about what we can do.

11:45

Hugh O'Donnell: Let us move on to the transition support that we have spoken about. I am particularly interested in assessments. The previous committee was concerned about students having to pay for an assessment to confirm an impairment that the Scottish Qualifications Authority had already accepted for the purpose of special arrangements during examinations, for example. In particular, Dundee College described requesting student payments as

an “unacceptable barrier to learning”. Has the Government taken steps to remove that barrier?

Fiona Hyslop: That is a key area of concern. The contention was raised in the inquiry that that barrier should not be there. On the issue of diagnosis being the passport for additional support, we recognise that there are difficulties and that diagnosis itself can be a barrier not just in colleges and universities but elsewhere.

I have talked about the review of the disabled students allowance that is taking place. As part of that review, the disabled student stakeholder group to which I referred has established a sub-group to examine the issue and to make recommendations to the Government. That group involves all the players. I cannot say whether we will change or remove the need for the assessment, but a sub-group is examining that specific concern. The review will throw up issues about who funds the diagnosis and how we can move forward. We are aware of that issue, which is why it has been delegated to the sub-group to look at.

Hugh O'Donnell: You are saying that such payments will still have to be made until the review is completed.

Fiona Hyslop: To be fair, we have moved on the non-medical personal help allowance—that has been progressed. The issue of assessment has not been progressed yet, but it is being considered by the sub-group.

Victoria Beattie: We hope to have recommendations on that by late summer 2008. We have said to quite a few institutions that they are now able to undertake their own needs assessments for the purpose of the DSA. If an institution receives an up-to-date, valid diagnosis, we do not ask for it again—we accept it. We are trying to be a lot more flexible on the issue of diagnosis.

Marlyn Glen: As an ex-teacher, I have encountered the problem and I question the whole idea of someone requiring a diagnosis. Everybody has different needs—you have talked about the need to see people as individuals. One of the problems of including the issue of dyslexia in teacher training is the fact that there are so many different difficulties that young people and older people can have. Therefore, I am a bit concerned about the idea of a diagnosis that is acceptable. No doctor or psychologist goes into a school to say whether a person has a particular disability, yet the SQA accepts what a teacher says and makes special arrangements on that basis. So, special arrangements can be made for someone up to the age of 15 or 16, but when they go to college they do not have those special arrangements.

Fiona Hyslop: That is why the policy needs close examination and why the stakeholder group is looking at the issue as part of the review.

Marlyn Glen: Is it looking at it in detail?

Fiona Hyslop: Yes. That is the level of detail at which the issue needs to be addressed.

The Convener: That would be worth while, minister. The matter of exactly when a diagnosis is made is a hugely complex area. Universal testing has been considered, but even that would not cover it, as an impairment can develop later on. It is a complex area and we welcome the stakeholder group examining it in detail.

Victoria Beattie: The group is considering a needs-led model that is based not on the diagnosis but on the actual needs of the student for the course that they are studying. That is why we have rolled out the pilot and why institutions are taking a needs-led approach.

Hugh O'Donnell: What extended work has been done in relation to recommendation 52, on familiarisation visits and early starts?

Fiona Hyslop: I have previously referred to the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004, which requires identification 12 months before somebody might progress and then a report after six months. We are starting to see that coming through. As I said, we want to ensure that best practice in that regard is extended.

As part of the disabled students allowance review, we are discussing how we can improve information, advice and guidance for disabled students. The focus is on what Careers Scotland can and should be doing, but the stakeholder group will help to advance that, and to encourage and facilitate the uptake of early starts and familiarisation visits for disabled students. The institutions themselves will bear a lot of the responsibility. We expect institutions and organisations such as schools and colleges to take responsibility not just for what they do when a young person is with them but for that individual's progression. Colleges and universities have to take responsibility not just for teaching an individual but for receiving them and planning for that. When I was in opposition and the Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Bill was going through, I tried to explore the extent to which requirements on that could be put into the bill.

We are increasingly relying on the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004 to be the vehicle for such progression. We expect familiarisation visits to be part of the six months' preparation. To be fair, it is still early to see whether that is happening. The report on this area that the funding council has commissioned

from HMIE should be able to tell us how effective it has been to have more familiarisation built in as an automatic part of the plan for progression. The HMIE report is due to be published in April. We need evidence on how effectively that is working, and the report should help to provide that.

Hugh O'Donnell: Would you like there to be a co-ordinator to bridge the transition from school to college, as there is between primary 6 and secondary 2?

Fiona Hyslop: There needs to be co-ordination of progression. I will not micromanage how that works with regard to who does that, but the school-college stakeholder group should examine best practice. "Partnership Matters" also makes it clear what should happen with that.

Hugh O'Donnell: How is best practice disseminated, particularly in relation to key workers and support workers who work with people with disabilities? What, specifically, has been done to disseminate best practice and what monitoring of that is in place?

Fiona Hyslop: How transitions are managed is perhaps a key area to examine in relation to the national framework that has been developed with COSLA, because so many of the agencies that are involved are from local government. Disseminating best practice is key. We have to ensure that we have networks and planned events to allow that to happen. With regard to key workers, Careers Scotland is refocusing its service to strengthen provision, particularly for young people who need more choices and chances, including young disabled people.

An interim evaluation has been carried out of the Careers Scotland enhanced resources pilot. The evaluation focused on 13 schools in the seven target areas that we have identified for the more chances, more choices agenda. The interim evaluation provides further evidence of best practice in supporting young people from school to post-school, and it is the responsibility of Careers Scotland to share that. Therefore, evaluation has taken place since the predecessor committee made its recommendation. It is an interim evaluation, so there will obviously need to be a final one, the results of which will be shared.

The Convener: We have about half a dozen more questions, on areas that we had hoped to cover. Are you able to stay to answer those, if we can be brief and succinct?

Fiona Hyslop: I will make my answers as brief as possible.

Marlyn Glen: Recommendation 54 is on occupational standards—have you worked with professional bodies and Government agencies to review the occupational standards that are set by

professional bodies, to ensure that no artificial barriers exist to disabled people choosing careers represented by those bodies?

Fiona Hyslop: Yes. Obviously, it varies—Careers Scotland has a responsibility in some areas, and graduate careers advisory services in each university operate separately and individually, so we have to work with them. It is reasonable to expect skills development Scotland and Careers Scotland to take forward any issues with regard to occupational standards.

I have met most of the chief executives of the sector skills councils—who are employers—as part of that wider employer engagement. The issue must be tackled not only with the suppliers—the colleges and universities—but with employers. The closer co-operation that I am trying to develop between sector skills councils and colleges will enable people to think in a challenging way about the occupational barriers.

Marlyn Glen: In response to recommendation 56, on the subject of communication support, the previous Administration recognised that there were limited numbers of people with the skills to provide the types of communication support listed, and noted that it was investigating how those numbers could be increased. Could you update the committee on progress in that regard?

Fiona Hyslop: Heriot-Watt University's first diploma course in interpreting studies and skills has been completed, and there were 10 graduates. That course will contribute to the training of British Sign Language users, which was one of the key recommendations of the report. The Scottish Government is working in a number of areas. We have invested £300,000 to develop and fund the graduate diploma and the BRITE centre has produced an interactive resource. Indeed, there are further developments as part of the "Partnership Matters" project. As there is quite a lot of activity in this area, it might be useful if we write to the committee with further details, as that will ensure that the response on this key issue is as full as possible.

Marlyn Glen: That would be helpful, because I wanted to know about issues other than British Sign Language.

Fiona Hyslop: If you work with the clerks to identify the other areas that you are interested in, we can provide a comprehensive answer.

Bill Wilson (West of Scotland) (SNP): Good morning, minister—it still is morning.

Fiona Hyslop: Just.

Bill Wilson: The previous committee recommended—in recommendation 64—that the Scottish Executive address the perception that colleges are becoming day centres and that work

should be undertaken to ensure that students are not forced to study life courses as a means of keeping them occupied, as an easy option for the social services or to get colleges extra funding. There was some evidence that disabled students and students from areas of high deprivation could simply cycle through the system, doing a lot of courses but not progressing academically at all. What is the Scottish Government going to do to address that issue, which has been acknowledged to be a problem?

Fiona Hyslop: Again, the issue of progression is important. We have to recognise, in relation to funding for institutions, that it is not only the volume of courses that is important but the need to ensure that those students' needs and aspirations are met and that progression into supported employment is incentivised.

I was talking to the college principals last week and know that the majority of them are sensitive to the issue that you raise. They think that they play a valuable role in supporting students with disabilities and they want to continue to do that. However, in order to identify exactly what is happening in that regard, the funding council has commissioned the BRITE initiative to undertake a mapping study to examine the extent of further education provision, particularly in relation to young people with complex needs. There is a great deal of anecdotal evidence around this issue at the moment, and the BRITE initiative will ensure that we have more solid evidence.

Bill Wilson: In response to recommendation 65, regarding a greater provision of vocational courses tailored to employability skills, the previous Administration noted that the new skills for work courses were being piloted and that those courses emphasise employability skills. What has been the outcome of those pilots? Will those courses be widely implemented?

Fiona Hyslop: The interim evaluation of the new skills for work courses showed that the courses were viewed positively by colleges, schools, pupils, parents and employers. The final evaluation will be published by HMIE in the next few weeks. It would be inappropriate of me to speak about it in advance of that. However, I can say that I am enthusiastic about this issue, which offers great opportunities. We need to be flexible about whether the courses take place in colleges or in schools. We should be mindful of the OECD's recommendation that, if we want to have parity of esteem for vocational courses, a key issue is how and where we provide vocational education. In that regard, we should note that the OECD is not in favour of there being separate skills academies. It thinks that we should have more integrated provision in schools, which might provide opportunities for young people with disabilities.

The system should provide an individualised learning experience. We should enable people with disabilities to go to college, if that is appropriate and if it suits them. That follows on from Elaine Smith's point. However, I do not want to say too much before the publication of HMIE's report.

12:00

The Convener: We have two final questions on cross-cutting issues.

Sandra White: I want to ask about young people's attitudes, referring to recommendations 99 and 100. The previous committee recommended that the Executive should promote disability equality as part of education on good citizenship. Has any such work been done? If not, is it planned?

Recommendation 100 asked that the Executive and Learning and Teaching Scotland pull together all the relevant equality-related material for schools and then promote that material widely among schools and education authorities. In its evidence, Learning and Teaching Scotland said that it would be happy to work with the Government. Can you update us on progress?

Fiona Hyslop: Good news—there has been progress. I have mentioned the curriculum for excellence and the modernisation of the Scottish curriculum. A series of draft outcomes for learning and teaching has been produced. Work on that will be rolled out by the end of the school summer term.

Members will already have seen outcomes for literacy, maths, sciences and languages. As a result of our experience with the curriculum for excellence, we are including disability equality as part of education on citizenship. The new agenda for the four capacities was developed by the previous Government and has been progressed by this Government. Responsible citizenship is clearly part of that.

The four capacities in the curriculum for excellence are part of the 15 national outcomes. That shows the importance that the Government is placing on this issue.

Learning and Teaching Scotland is bringing together materials that will help in the roll-out of the curriculum for excellence, so the recommendation that you mentioned should be followed.

Sandra White: You ended on a good note there. Thank you.

The Convener: I thank the cabinet secretary for coming to the committee to discuss an inquiry that we consider very important. I think that it is safe to

say that we are encouraged by the amount of progress made, and by the way in which you are addressing the recommendations that affect your portfolio. We look forward to receiving the additional information that you have promised us. We will keep in touch with progress on certain recommendations that we have been discussing.

Sandra White: I have a very short final question. Cabinet secretary, you mentioned a two-way course, and I wanted to ask about so-called “pretendy” courses. The committee has heard a lot of evidence to say that such courses are being run in colleges. Would the committee be able to pass its evidence on?

Fiona Hyslop: We will pass it on to the funding council as part of the HMIE review.

The Convener: When we have considered all the evidence, we will pass it on.

Fiona Hyslop: Thank you.

The Convener: We will now move into private session to discuss items 2 and 3. I hope that Jamie Probert found today’s evidence session interesting. We have certainly been very pleased to have him here.

12:03

Meeting continued in private until 12:56.

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