

EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE

Tuesday 11 March 2008

Session 3

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EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE

4th 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)

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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:

John Loughton (Scottish Youth Parliament)

Margaret Murdoch (Scottish Pensioners Forum)

Sara O'Loan (LGBT Youth Scotland)

Jonathan Sher (Children in Scotland)

John Swinney (Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth)

John Thompson (Older LGBT Forum)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Terry Shevlin

ASSISTANT CLERK

Roy McMahon

LOCATION

Committee Room 2

Scottish Parliament

Equal Opportunities Committee

Tuesday 11 March 2008

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 09:48*]

Decisions on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Margaret Mitchell): Good morning everyone, and welcome to the fourth meeting of the Equal Opportunities Committee in 2008. I remind all present, including members, that mobile phones and BlackBerrys should be switched off completely, because they interfere with the sound system even when they are switched to silent.

We have only one apology this morning, which is from Michael McMahon.

Agenda item 1 is a decision on taking business in private. Do members agree to discuss our work programme in private under item 5?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: Agenda item 2 is a decision on whether to consider the paper by the gender reporter in private at our next meeting. Do members agree to take that paper in private at the next meeting?

Members indicated agreement.

Age

09:49

The Convener: Our main business this morning is a round-table discussion on age. First, I invite members and participants to introduce themselves. I will start: I am Margaret Mitchell and I am convener of the Equal Opportunities Committee.

Hugh O'Donnell (Central Scotland) (LD): I am a member for Central Scotland.

Jonathan Sher (Children in Scotland): I am the director of research, policy and practice development at Children in Scotland.

Marlyn Glen (North East Scotland) (Lab): I am an MSP for North East Scotland.

Sara O'Loan (LGBT Youth Scotland): I am the research manager at LGBT Youth Scotland.

Bill Wilson (West of Scotland) (SNP): I am an MSP for the West of Scotland.

John Thompson (Older LGBT Forum): Good morning. I am from the older LGBT forum.

Bill Kidd (Glasgow) (SNP): I am a Scottish National Party MSP for Glasgow.

Margaret Murdoch (Scottish Pensioners Forum): I am from the Scottish Pensioners Forum executive and the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations.

Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP): I am an MSP for Glasgow.

Elaine Smith (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab): I am deputy convener of the Equal Opportunities Committee and MSP for Coatbridge and Chryston.

The Convener: Thank you all for that.

Our purpose in holding a round-table discussion on age is to consider in a less formal manner two broad areas: how older and younger people access public services, and how they are affected by bullying. Depending on the issues that are raised, the committee might decide to undertake further work. We are therefore keen to ensure that the discussion focuses on practical issues and ideas that the Scottish Parliament has the power to deal with.

Although the round-table format is less formal and participants can respond to and seek clarification from one another, I remind everyone that they should indicate to the convener when they wish to speak. That will help to achieve a good flow of discussion and ensure that everyone gets their fair share.

I see that we have been joined by our final participant. Would you like to introduce yourself, John?

John Loughton (Scottish Youth Parliament): Hi. I am chairman of the Scottish Youth Parliament.

The Convener: We are pleased to have you here.

Our first topic is to examine how older and younger people access public services. To what extent does everyone consider public services to be responding to the needs of older and younger people?

Margaret Murdoch: Good morning everyone. Public services are falling down on the care of older people. A great many unfair charges are being levied. Although people are assessed to determine whether they can afford their care, £11 per hour is being charged for care in the home, £7 is being charged for a weekly shop and £1 per week is being charged for alarm systems. Under the previous Government, those were all free of charge, or the charge was small—it was only £4 for a week's care services, and the other services were free. Elderly people are now being discriminated against. If someone does not have any money, their care is free, but a lot of people have savings that go just over the limit, so they have to pay.

The Convener: Does that apply across the board, or are you talking about a particular local authority? Does the situation vary between local authorities?

Margaret Murdoch: I am talking about Fife, but other places are following its example. I have heard that in Edinburgh, care costs £22 per hour.

The Convener: So there is a bit of a postcode lottery; it depends where people live.

Margaret Murdoch: Yes, it does.

Sara O'Loan: I suppose that I will speak mainly about lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender young people, because I work for an LGBT organisation, but LGBT young people primarily are young people, so the issues that I bring up will probably apply to a wider group.

On general service use, we have found a gap between the demand for certain services and the number of LGBT young people who access them. One barrier to young people using services is confidentiality. That is extremely relevant for all young people when using services, but it is particularly relevant for LGBT young people, who may not be out as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender to their parents and peers. Another issue is the experience—or just the perception—of being judged by staff and feeling that they are not

receptive to needs. Even just a perception that that will be the case might mean that some young people, especially LGBT young people, will not access a service. Services might not always be aware of those fears.

The Convener: Is there an issue about how information on services is made available, how services are advertised and how people tap into that information in the first instance? It would be helpful if you gave examples of something that is not working.

Sara O'Loan: My information comes from research that we conducted recently under the social inclusion division of the multiple and complex needs initiative. We explored LGBT young people's use of mainstream, non LGBT-specific services and specialist LGBT-specific services. With sexual health services, we found that young people feel unable to come out, even though that information is hugely relevant to the support or resources that people receive in those services. With other services, the links between sexual orientation or gender identity and need are perhaps not explicit. For example, housing is a big issue for LGBT young people, as they may be thrown out of their houses by parents and then need to access housing services.

The Convener: Where would people get information if they needed to find out about housing services? Is there an issue about people getting information confidentially?

Sara O'Loan: I think so. There may be a feeling in some services that LGBT identity does not necessarily matter, because it is a private issue that does not influence someone's service use.

The Convener: That is helpful.

John Thompson: I will qualify what Sara O'Loan said by pointing out that the situation is the same for older people. Confidentiality is important. Speaking as an older LGBT person, I start from the basis that we suffer from the onset of homophobia at an early stage. My anxiety as an older LGBT person is about how I would access any service. I would feel rather nervous about that and would need to overcome that feeling. Age Concern Scotland has stepped in and has become more inclusive with regard to putting people in the direction of services. However, as I have no experience of accessing services, I cannot say any more than that—I am going on what people have told me.

The Convener: Is the approach to signposting services in the voluntary sector different from that in the public sector?

John Thompson: Yes. It would probably help if local authorities could say that they were much more inclusive.

10:00

Jonathan Sher: As there are two guests here from youth organisations, I will limit my remarks primarily to services involving children. It is clear that, in Scotland, there is no single answer to the question of children's access to public services: the picture is complex. Scotland does some things exceedingly well in relation to public services for children, and we should be proud of them, but there are gaps. Some of those gaps are not specifically about age; they are about the postcode lottery in providing services in rural and remote communities.

Three general points are worth making. First, Scotland does best when universal services for children are topped up with targeted services for children whose needs are not met by the universal services. That seems, in general, to be a much more effective and efficient approach than trying to replace universal services with targeted ones. The combination of universal and top-up services seems to work.

Secondly, although there are issues about direct services for children, it is crucial that there are good public services for their mothers, fathers, carers or whoever looks after them. Scotland is weaker in that area than it is in the area of direct services for children, and support for parents is not as great or as effective as we would like it to be. So, the age issue is complicated by the need for services that support children's primary carers as well as direct services for children.

Thirdly, it is crucial to the maintenance and improvement of good public services for children that their views are taken seriously on whether the services meet their needs. Again, the picture in Scotland is mixed. At times, consultation with children and young people has been conducted very well, but, unfortunately, too many times it has been little more than a superficial, tick-box exercise rather than a genuine exploration of what children and young people perceive to be true about the services that they receive and a serious consideration of their ideas on how to improve them.

The Convener: It is always good to outline what is working as well as what is not working before moving on. Sandra White is next.

Sandra White: I do not know whether John Loughton wants to come in first.

John Loughton: I will come in after you.

Sandra White: I want to raise the issue of health services for older and younger people. Is there a perception that young people do not get proper public services because they are younger? The perception of younger people is that they go to the doctor only for a certain thing. The

perception of older people is that they go to the doctor because they are getting older and sometimes do not get the services that they deserve. What is the panel's view on the health services that younger and older people get? Do they get the same services as the majority of those in the middle age range?

Also, do younger and older people get the proper level of service from the housing services?

Jonathan Sher: On the health side, I will use one illustration to make a general point. Children and adults perceive time differently. We all remember waiting for Christmas. If it was a month away, that seemed close to forever. I raise that illustration because waiting times for health services, in particular mental health services, are simply too long. Waiting times for children are too long, even if in statistical terms the waiting period is exactly the same for a child as it is for an adult, because telling a child who has serious emotional or mental health needs that they will be seen in six months' time is tantamount to telling them that they will not be seen at all. In organising and planning public services it is important to understand the reality from the point of view of the patient or client. Time is critical.

John Loughton: I have a few points. There must be effective information for children and young people. Sometimes a single word can present a barrier. Jargon can turn off a young person who wants to access a service or get involved. Public service providers must think carefully about their target audiences and whether they are providing youth-friendly information. If a universal service is being provided, separate literature could be produced for young people.

Opportunities to capitalise on modern technology are increasing, particularly in public services. There has been success in the private and voluntary sectors. In the voluntary sector, much work is user-focused and based around the target audience. For example, the Young Scot and Scottish Youth Parliament websites are worthy of note for their use of technology to engage young people in the democratic process.

Sandra White asked whether young people feel excluded from universal services. I think that the answer is yes in part, particularly for teenagers, where there might be a trust issue. It can be more difficult to penetrate the barriers when many things are happening in a teenager's life. I do not know whether members read the recent report "Being Young in Scotland 2007", which was commissioned by YouthLink Scotland. When young people were asked how much they trust youth workers, doctors, teachers, politicians and others, youth workers came out quite high, politicians did not come out as high and doctors came out somewhere in the middle. It is

interesting that young people would turn to a youth worker before they turned to a doctor. There might be scope for interceptor work so that we can capitalise on that.

Young people can be not only users but designers of public services. Jonathan Sher mentioned the youth voice in shaping services. Ultimately, a young person knows best what a young person needs—there is a lot of truth in that. We should consider how we engage young people and civil society in general in local community planning and in shaping our public services.

The Convener: You have given us much useful information. When you talked about using new technology, did you have in mind, for example, that a young person would be much more likely to respond to a text message than to a letter?

John Loughton: I think so. Limited steps have been taken—for example, there is limited scope to text the Parliament. Even a three-page document can present a barrier to some young people. A young person will not say, “I’m dyslexic,” or explain that there is an issue about their filling in a form; they will say, “I’m not doing that,” or they will just rebel. The internet can be a less intimidating environment, because it enables young people to do things in their own time, without face-to-face contact, which can help.

Hugh O’Donnell: John Loughton and Jonathan Sher talked about the need to hear the voices of young service users. Are you aware of instances in which the Government has done more than a box-ticking exercise when designing policy? For example, to what extent are young people involved in the design of the curriculum for excellence?

Jonathan Sher: There are examples. I will cite two with which I am personally familiar. As you will know, Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Education recently inspected the implementation of the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004. That inspection raised some questions and concerns, and one local authority—North Ayrshire Council, which anticipated the HMIE results—decided that it wanted to know more, so it commissioned Children in Scotland to consult children, young people and parents who were eligible to receive additional support for learning services, even if they were not currently receiving them. With the support of that local authority, we undertook an extensive consultation and ended up talking to more than 1,000 children, young people and parents in North Ayrshire to find out what worked, what did not work and their perceptions of what could be improved.

North Ayrshire Council should be commended for taking the initiative and putting up the resources to find out in a serious, systematic way

the perceptions of the people who are supposed to benefit from the service, rather than just having a few anecdotes that those people trotted out at meetings. Systematically investigating what is true rather than relying on anecdotal evidence makes all the difference in the world.

North Ayrshire Council is one local authority that did well; another is Scottish Borders Council. For the past three years, it has been working with Children in Scotland on how to implement the law that says that school buildings should be accessible to all children. There has been a classroom-by-classroom consultation at the primary and secondary levels, which—to make a long story short—has resulted in significant changes in what schools do. Also, the children themselves have been involved in working with the architects and the local authority on the new school builds in the Borders to ensure that new schools are designed and built in ways that reflect their perception of what works and what does not.

That is serious engagement, as opposed to a tick-box exercise, and those are commendable examples from two different authorities.

The Convener: They had concrete results, too.

Hugh O’Donnell: The responsibility for delivering education belongs to local government, but is there a case for saying that, on service design, national Government should engage in a process like that in the two examples that you cited?

Jonathan Sher: Oh, absolutely. The fundamental principle is that it is not enough to proclaim a right. Under article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, children have a right to be heard and heeded. It is one thing to proclaim that, but it is another thing to take it seriously and implement it well. We have examples of what it means to do it right, but they are the happy illustrations, not the norm. By working with the Government and, particularly, the inspection agencies, Parliament can establish an inspection standard that says that doing something to consult children and young people is not sufficient in itself—the consultation must be meaningful enough, systematic enough and serious enough for the public authority to get a good score when it is inspected. That is one example of how to translate good intentions into good legislation and good practice.

Hugh O’Donnell: Thanks for that.

The Convener: Elaine Smith will come in briefly. Margaret Murdoch is waiting patiently, but I promise that she will be next.

Elaine Smith: The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child has been mentioned. Away back in time, my first members’ business debate was

about the rights of the child, particularly the child's right to play. During that debate, members asked for a children and young people's commissioner to be established, which has now happened. How does the Commissioner for Children and Young People in Scotland fit into the discussion that we are having? Is the role being used effectively?

10:15

The Convener: We will park that issue just now; Margaret Murdoch wants to contribute.

Margaret Murdoch: My point relates to older people. There is still a postcode lottery when it comes to people getting operations. I have been speaking to a gentleman who has been in great distress because he has waited two years for a hip operation. When he got in touch with the hospital after a year, he discovered that the staff had lost all his records, so he had to go to the end of the queue. After another year he has been reassessed, and it has been discovered that his health is not good enough for him to undergo the hip operation. In effect, he has been shelved.

His mobility is really bad. I often see him struggling along, and I ask him how he is. It is such a shame that he was not moved a bit further up the queue after his records were lost for a year. Had he received more immediate attention, his health would have been better, which would have allowed him to have the operation. Now, unfortunately, he cannot have it. It is very sad that such things are still going on. We might think that something could be done about that in this day and age.

The Convener: Was there an issue with the gentleman's representation? Did he have relatives who could speak up for him?

Margaret Murdoch: He did not seem to have any relatives.

The Convener: So there might be an issue there.

Margaret Murdoch: Yes. I tried to advise him. I told him to get in touch with the hospital straight away and to find out what it could offer him. His mobility is very impaired now.

The Convener: So there are perhaps issues around putting people in touch with older people who are isolated.

Margaret Murdoch: Yes, that is right.

The Convener: Let us have some feedback in response to Elaine Smith's important question about the Commissioner for Children and Young People in Scotland.

Jonathan Sher: To have a society and a Government that does not include a children's

commissioner seems unimaginable now. During the relatively short time that the commissioner's office has been in existence here, it has made a real difference and has made its mark. That says something important. There are things that people like more or less about the work that has been undertaken, but the office itself has become a fixture in Scottish life, and it ought to remain one.

The Convener: Have you had direct contact with the office? Can you give examples of the commissioner helping with your work?

Jonathan Sher: There are numerous examples. We work closely with the commissioner—in fact, she writes a column in our monthly magazine. In the past couple of weeks, the commissioner's office has issued two important reports. One is on the moving and handling of physically disabled children. That important work had not been handled—pardon the pun—as well as it should have been over the years. Secondly, the commissioner brought out a groundbreaking report on the children of prisoners, which helps us to understand that they have particular needs and are often overlooked. Those two examples, just from the past couple of weeks, are concrete illustrations of how having a children's commissioner makes a difference for the better. Sometimes there is a follow-through, but at the very minimum the commissioner's work brings strong awareness and understanding of issues that are too often overlooked.

Sandra White: My point fits in neatly with that. The Commissioner for Children and Young People does an excellent job—Kathleen Marshall is wonderful. I live for the day when we have an older people's commissioner, too. I was talking about it to Margaret Murdoch, who raised the issue. You, too, convener, spoke about people who are not able to get operations having relatives. Call me cynical, but I sometimes think that things are done deliberately because the people concerned are of a certain age. I am not pointing the finger at anyone, but we must be open to the fact that there are discriminatory practices against older and younger people. There are examples involving policing, concessionary fares for students and so on. Do people have any examples of, or thoughts on, age discrimination?

The Convener: Does anyone have any specific examples?

Margaret Murdoch: I keep butting in—I am sorry. The Scottish Pensioners Forum has done a great deal of work on travel and the state of the buses. As members know, pensioners have bus passes now, but the state of the buses leaves much to be desired. FirstBus seems to be much more sympathetic towards us. It expects that, by 2010, all the buses on its routes will be low-liner buses. However, Stagecoach is a different kettle

of fish. At the moment, it has a few buses that have only one disabled access place. The steps on long-distance Stagecoach buses are so high and steep that it is difficult even for a person who is quite able to get up them.

We have worked hard to get improvements. I have been with Transport Scotland in Glasgow, which deals with all the bus companies. It is trying to get better buses on the Stagecoach routes in addition to those on the FirstBus routes. It is to be hoped that that will happen, but the costs of low-liner buses are high.

Apparently, we will have to pay to go on the trams in Edinburgh when they are up and running—our free bus passes will be no use. That is discrimination if anything is.

The Convener: That is a good point to raise today of all days. After this session, we will take evidence in our disability inquiry from the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth, on progress on public transport, including buses. We will ensure that we ask him about the point that you have raised.

Margaret Murdoch: Okay. Thanks.

Bill Kidd: I am interested in what you are saying, as I visited FirstBus recently and spoke to it about accessibility for pensioners and disabled people. It seems to be addressing the matter, although it will take time to do so. It is a well-off company and I pointed out that perhaps it should not take quite as much time to address the matter as it suggested.

Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People was mentioned. That commissioner advocates on behalf of children and young people, and it has been mentioned that she and her staff have been extremely successful in drawing people's attention to circumstances relating to them. Would it be practical or desirable for other groups, such as older people or LGBT people, to have someone similar who would act as an advocate for them? Would having such an advocate not necessarily be desirable, as it may result in people being put in a box rather than being seen as part of society?

The Convener: That is a general question for people to muse over.

Bill Wilson: I have a question on transport for Margaret Murdoch that is relevant to the discussion that we will have after this session. Some disabled groups think that information is missing, is not accessible or is accessible only to some groups. Do you have any comments to make on the availability and usefulness of information?

Margaret Murdoch: Yes. Until we went to see the Transport Scotland person in Glasgow—the

person is head of Scotland's transport planning—there were many things that we did not have access to. We were told that an attempt would be made to get any buses that were more than 10 years old off the road, but that that would not happen until 2015. It is shockingly difficult for elderly people to get on and off some of the older buses. They start jerkily and throw people backwards, causing them to lose their footing, but the drivers just drive on. In England, buses are not allowed to move off until everyone is seated, and people are not allowed to get up until the bus has stopped. There are big notices to that effect in buses down south. I do not see why such notices cannot also be put up in Scottish buses. Drivers will say that they will not be able to keep on time if they wait until everyone is seated before moving off, but I have seen some nasty accidents on buses, which could have had serious consequences. I have seen people flung off their feet, which is dreadful.

Bill Wilson: It is useful for elderly people with mobility problems to know that buses on certain routes are not accessible because they have steep stairs, for example. Is specific information missing? If such information is available, are there certain groups that cannot access it? For example, it may not be accessible to people with poor sight, because it is in a small font size. If information is not accessible, how can it be made more accessible? What routes of information access that could be used are we not using?

Margaret Murdoch: Improvements could definitely be made. If operators do not have sufficient low-liner buses to cater for all routes, they must ensure that such buses are used on particular routes at specific times. If it is made clear on timetables that low-liner buses will be available at particular times, people in wheelchairs, elderly people and needier children, both older and younger, who have difficulty walking will be prepared and will be able to access those buses without difficulties.

Bill Wilson: Are the present sources of information entirely adequate?

Margaret Murdoch: They are not at all adequate. Anything can turn up. When people expect a low-liner bus to be on a route, an old double-decker will come along. When that happens, people in wheelchairs are left at the side of the road. Information could definitely be improved. I use public services at all times.

The Convener: That makes you well qualified to comment on the issue.

Sara O'Loan: We were asked to give some specific examples of discrimination on the ground of age. In housing services, there is discrimination against young people. An external housing

association consulted one of our LGBT youth groups. The person who carried out the consultation was coming from an equalities perspective and wanted to know what the barriers to housing for LGBT young people might be, so she asked questions along those lines. She was interested to hear from the young people in the group that although there were sometimes issues relating to their sexual orientation or gender identity, the basic reason why they could not get houses was that they were 16 or 17. They had to sleep on their friends' sofas.

Different parts of people's identity will be more or less important, depending on the context and their stage of life. The people who have been invited to give evidence at today's meeting work mainly on age issues or LGBT issues, but we work with hugely diverse groups. Age is one equality issue, but there are five or more others, and they all interplay and are more or less important at different times. That is a specific example.

10:30

Elaine Smith: Sara O'Loan mentioned 16 and 17-year-olds and discrimination. I do not know whether you are aware of it, but does that mean that those 16 and 17-year-olds are not deemed eligible for tenancies? I ask because there was a test case in Monklands more than 20 years ago in which a 16-year-old went to court. I thought that that set the precedent that they would be allowed tenancies.

Sara O'Loan: Much of our day-to-day work is focused on housing—although not officially—because it is an important issue for LGBT young people. I am not entirely certain whether, in the specific example that I used, the young people who identified those difficulties had declared themselves homeless or were at that in-between stage of sleeping on a friend's sofa or just looking into finding a house. We tell young people that they have a right to access housing at that age and we support them.

Elaine Smith: I am trying to get to the bottom of whether you think that we should be considering whether 16 and 17-year-olds should be allowed to apply for tenancies, if indeed they are not allowed to.

Sara O'Loan: I would say so. All that I have to go on are the experiences of the young people who access our services. Their issues with housing are quite important.

Bill Wilson: Are there any hard data on whether 16 and 17-year-olds are discriminated against? Can anyone here tell us that?

The Convener: Could everyone talk through the chair, otherwise those who are waiting will not get

their fair share? Jonathan Sher has been waiting for quite some time and he will be followed by John Thompson.

Jonathan Sher: I am conscious of the time but I did not want to leave the issue of public services without first commending the committee for raising the issue of age discrimination for younger and older people. One of the things that Children in Scotland has been adamant about is not getting involved in the politics of pitting one age group against the other, and I am glad to see that that is not the point of today's session. We need to live in a society in which discrimination against people at either end of the age spectrum is intolerable, and where co-operation between the generations is the norm rather than the exception.

Since specific examples were asked for, I am happy to let everyone know, if they do not know already, about generations working together, which is being developed right now through a Scottish Government grant. The grant was given to Children in Scotland but the director is the head of the senior studies institute at the University of Strathclyde. The point is to develop a national centre—the Scottish Centre for Intergenerational Practice. Now you know why we call the project generations working together.

One way to get past age discrimination is explicitly to promote intergenerational working through old and young people working, learning and solving community problems together. If the committee and the Parliament can do anything to encourage and advance intergenerational work, it would be a welcome and necessary next step.

I talked to some of our partners, and I have to cite a couple of older people's issues that have not been raised so far. I understand that Age Concern recently published a paper about access to health services and the issues that older people face. Someone who works in the senior volunteer sector told me about an energy challenge project that involves using older volunteers to help older people to deal with energy savings and housing issues. They found that often, people who own their homes tend to be asset rich but cash poor and are not aware that they are eligible for assistance. An example was cited of a disabled elderly woman who had not been able to leave her home for three years because she could not manage to get down the steps at her front door. She was not aware that public assistance was available to solve the problem, which could have been solved easily at low cost and made a real difference.

My colleagues who work with older people pointed out to me that part of the problem might be generational, in that many older people are hesitant about asking for help from public services. Sometimes the issue is not outright discrimination

so that older people cannot get help; it is that help is offered in such a way that instead of encouraging older people to feel comfortable about accessing it, it discourages them from doing so.

At the other end of the age spectrum, we have seen repeatedly a similar situation with parents. For example, parent education classes are often seen as a punishment rather than a help. Since I have never met anyone who got parenting just right all the time—I include myself—parent education ought to be a public service that is widely accessed, but it is delivered in such a way that it is not seen as being accessible. For older and younger people, there is theoretical as well as effective access to help. That is an important distinction.

The Convener: I am glad that you picked up on parenting because you mentioned it earlier as a possible service gap—there are insufficient services for parents and children working together in an intergenerational way. That is hugely important and something that the committee will want to note.

John Thompson: The idea that comes to me is independence. I refer to the comment that Bill Kidd made about advocacy. I would like advocacy to be more integrated with the community rather than its being separate. It is important for LGBT people across the board to be part of that and to be accepted.

It is important that an older person tries to maintain their independence because it keeps them going. I speak from personal experience of my mother, who is fiercely independent and fights for her independence. Talk to her about public services or anything like that and she shrinks in horror. Although she gets disability allowance, she does not spend it, simply because she is scared that they might take it from her. Other people here are saying that too. Pride is involved in people's willingness to access financial aid. That must be taken on board in a sensitive way. People need to understand why they get such financial aid.

John Loughton: I return to the point about access to housing for young people. Technically, a young person of 16 or 17 can go along to their local housing office and say that they want a house or whatever and that is fine—I did that, for various reasons. However, workers in such offices sometimes make an automatic presumption about what is right for young people. They might say, "You are 16. How can you possibly think that your own independent living space is the best thing for you?" I was told in a patronising way to skip home to mum until I was old enough to think for myself. We have to consider what seems to be an invisible barrier: people's attitudes. Just because you are

young does not mean that you cannot be independent or know what is best for you.

Two discriminatory practices that young people express quite a lot of concern about jump out at me. The first, of which I am sure members are aware, is the Mosquito phenomenon. If we are talking about things that discriminate on the basis of age and which infringe human rights, the Mosquito is the epitome of that. As I am sure everyone knows, a Mosquito emits a high-pitched noise and such devices are placed strategically around the country to chase young people away. The Commissioner for Children and Young People in Scotland, Kathleen Marshall, has worked hard on that with the Youth Parliament and other UK commissioners. Mosquitos need to be seriously examined. Young people are getting in touch with the Youth Parliament to complain about them. They are disgusting; there is no place for such a device in a modern Scotland. Other measures are being taken as part of the justice agenda and a working group is reviewing the antisocial behaviour system, so things are happening. Shepherding young people does not fit in with that agenda.

Increasingly, young carers—who do the same job as others—tell us that they feel left out of the system financially and that what they do is not recognised. Sometimes, they are a forgotten force. Young carers put in much work and effort. They often sacrifice their education, social time and life chances to help a parent or older sibling in need. We need more special support for young carers. They are supporters themselves, but a wider package of support for them is needed.

The Convener: You will probably be heartened to know that the committee is to hold a similar round-table discussion to today's session, on carers, when the plight of young and older carers will be examined in depth. Your contribution to that is helpful.

Sandra White: I will try to be brief, because time is moving on. There is lawful and unlawful discrimination—John Loughton picked up on a couple of forms of that. In my mind, dispersal orders are lawful discrimination against young people, because they are geared towards young people. To a lesser degree, Mosquitos are part of that—they are not against the law yet. The Government subscribes to such lawful measures. Lawful discrimination against older people happens in insurance—older people pay higher insurance premiums—and in employment, although that is outwith the Parliament's scope.

Unlawful discrimination is, for example, the perception that older people do not need dental services—it is more difficult for them to obtain such services. If an older person goes along to the doctor, they are given a couple of pills or their

condition is said to be Alzheimer's or something like that. Discrimination is practised against older and younger people.

Young people are entitled to housing, but constituents have told me that the types of housing that are geared towards younger people are one-bedroom apartments or studio apartments, which do not even have a bedroom because, under law from Westminster, that is cheaper—less money is paid. It is difficult for young people to access private sector accommodation of a bedroom, living room and bathroom, because the Government does not pay what the private sector asks for. That is a big problem. Many young people are in bedsits for that reason alone.

The Convener: It would be good at this point for Marlyn Glen to introduce the other aspect that we want to cover.

Marlyn Glen: I will move the discussion on. We have heard some evidence on bullying. Is the bullying that older people suffer similar to that which younger people suffer? Do common solutions exist?

Sara O'Loan: Bullying is an important issue for LGBT Youth Scotland. Young people tell us that their experiences in schools as LGBT young people are important to them. Homophobic and transphobic bullying can happen in schools, which has consequences such as mental health problems, early school leaving and truancy.

There is also evidence to suggest that discrimination against young people on sexual orientation or gender identity grounds happens in a lot of other settings, such as mainstream youth groups. There is a gap in our knowledge of bullying of looked-after and accommodated young people. You might be able to correct me, but I am not aware of a massive amount of research and evidence in that area.

10:45

The Convener: Is bullying a general issue for young people, as well as for LGBT young people?

Sara O'Loan: Absolutely, yes. As I said, I am speaking from the LGBT perspective. LGBT Youth Scotland is a founding partner of respectme, Scotland's anti-bullying service, which deals with bullying in school, outwith school and across the board and supports professionals to enable them to tackle it and support young people. There is a lot of focus on prejudice-based bullying within that, but bullying is an enormous issue for all young people.

Bill Kidd: Bullying exists throughout society, and it probably needs to be tackled at an early age because people who are bullies when they are

young are likely to be much the same as they get older. People think that everybody grows out of such behaviour patterns, but that is not necessarily the case.

Do you think that the intergenerational practice that Jonathan Sher mentioned is a way of bringing in older people's experiences to try to help young people through the problems that they experience when they are being bullied at an early age? The experiences of older people, who have known bullying not only when they were children, but as they grew up, can be used to try to help younger people over the problems that they have experienced. Perhaps older people who have internalised the bullying might gain from mixing with young people, as they see what is happening to them.

The Convener: Has that been tackled in your intergenerational studies, Jonathan?

Jonathan Sher: It is not a focal point, because there is not much evidence of bullying by the older generation of the younger generation and vice versa. The intergenerational bit is particularly helpful in diminishing the lack of understanding, respect and empathy. To the extent that that contributes to bad behaviour on either side, the intergenerational work has a major role to play in creating empathy, understanding and a sense of commonality. That is good, but bullying is an enormous problem. My understanding is that it is still the case that the number 1 reason for children calling ChildLine is to report bullying behaviour and to ask for help with it.

There is no question about the prevalence of bullying, but the way in which it occurs appears to be different at the two ends of the age spectrum. For children, it tends to be other children at school or elsewhere who are the bullies, rather than family members or carers. With older people, it tends to be their adult children or carers, so it is a different phenomenon. It is no better—bullying at any age is a bad thing and we need to figure out how to end it—but the way in which it plays out appears to be different. There is a website—of course—for an organisation called elderabuse.org.uk.

Age Concern and other older people's organisations have been active in identifying the problem and some of the solutions. Although respectme is new on the scene, it is a good place to go for practical strategies for dealing with bullying.

Sara O'Loan: Older and younger people can be brought together, but that probably has to centre around a particular issue. I can chat about the couple of examples of intergenerational work between older and younger LGBT people that I gave in the written submission. That sort of work is

new. It was possible because there was a particular issue on which to focus. There are common roots of prejudice and discrimination towards older and younger LGBT people. It might be experienced differently and have different effects at different points during people's lives, but there are common issues to address.

LGBT Youth Scotland is piloting the SPARX mentoring scheme, which involves safe, supported and goal-focused mentoring of younger LGBT people by older LGBT people. We worked with both groups to find out their needs and their hopes for the project and found that both groups had common experiences of discrimination. The adults said that they wanted to help younger people who were experiencing situations that they had once experienced, or were still experiencing but in a different way. Younger people wanted "normal people" as role models and thought that they could learn from the older people. The scheme is in its early days, but what we have heard has been really refreshing.

Margaret Murdoch: With the breakdown of families these days, many parents have to go out to work and their children are looked after by their grandparents or even great-grandparents. Older people have a lot to give younger people. My grandchildren have all been brought up around me and I have tried to encourage them in baking and all sorts of things around the house. Some children grow up without even knowing how to boil an egg. Grandparents or great-grandparents have a great deal to offer their grandchildren by keeping in touch all the time. My grandchildren know that they can always come to me if their parents are late home from work. Grandparents can act as an anchor. So many parents have to work long hours because of financial strain. Parents can be held up for many reasons. My daughter was held up last week and could not collect her son, so I had to go to the school and pick him up. We can help in all sorts of ways. I am sure that lots of people could help if they wanted to.

Sandra White: I was going to draw attention to the website that Jonathan Sher mentioned. We are talking about bullying, but the organisation is called elderabuse.org.uk. Do the witnesses think that we are talking about abuse rather than bullying? Quite often, the elderly experience abuse by their own family, but it does not get reported—there is pressure, which is similar to peer pressure. Abuse happens in care homes, too.

If an incident in a care home is reported, there is always a worry that the perpetrator will do worse. I regard what happens, particularly to older people, as abuse rather than bullying. Young people suffer abuse, but older people suffer a different type of abuse, and we do not know enough about what happens. We should use the term "abuse" more,

particularly in relation to care homes, where people are too frightened to report problems, although the sector is covered by legislation. I suppose that there is abuse in children's homes, too, but we do not have evidence.

The Convener: Perhaps there is an issue to do with dominance, which develops into something more sinister.

Sandra White: It is always thought that people become more like children as they get older, which might or might not be true, but the abuse that is meted out to younger people is not necessarily the same as the abuse that is meted out to older people, although older people can be just as helpless. We do not have evidence of what is happening.

The Convener: It might be useful to recap and ascertain whether there are matters that we have not covered. I think that Hugh O'Donnell wanted to ask about a different issue. After we have heard from him, I will use the final five minutes of the discussion to invite people to raise issues that they have not had an opportunity to mention.

Hugh O'Donnell: We talked in general terms about the two ends of the spectrum. Given Scotland's cultural diversity, are there groups of people whose requirements are less likely to be catered for by public services?

The Convener: I suppose that the question is whether there is a gap in services. Does anything immediately come to mind?

Hugh O'Donnell: Perhaps I can prompt the witnesses. For example, how easy is it for older members of the Asian community to access services? Such people might have different cultural and linguistic backgrounds and different expectations to do with the extended family. For younger people in the gay community, are there generational or cultural pressures that make it hard to access services?

The Convener: There might also be language issues.

Sara O'Loan: The question is interesting, and I do not know the answer. I made the point that there are many facets to the identity of a young LGBT person, one of which might be a black and minority ethnic background. Such groups are hugely underrepresented among the people who access our youth services, which suggests that there are barriers to accessing LGBT-specific services. We do not know enough about whether there are issues to do with access to other services.

The Convener: That was helpful.

Sandra White: It is pretty well known that, for some groups, the problem is not receiving

services but providing services. Gay men are prevented from giving blood, even though there is no proof whatever that the blood is contaminated. I have written to the Scottish National Blood Transfusion Service about that.

The Convener: Elaine Smith, do you want to raise an issue that we have not covered?

Elaine Smith: No, thank you. We have had a wide-ranging discussion.

John Loughton: I want to reiterate the overarching issue. We can tackle many of the problems that we have discussed by empowering young people as designers as well as users of services.

Sandra White: There is not a great difference between young people and older people, in that both are discriminated against in certain ways. You talk about access to services and being able to design services. Community planning partnerships envisage that older people and younger people would be able to have a say in the planning of housing estates and so on. It is important that the whole spectrum of ages has such an opportunity. Older people go back into education as well, so I hope that it can be as accessible for them as it is for younger people. It is all about involving people. I agree with everything that has been said, but we need more evidence of how discrimination is practised.

11:00

The Convener: Yes. Solid examples make a difference.

Margaret Murdoch: Dental services, which were touched on briefly, are important for older and younger people. It is becoming impossible for parents to get their children's teeth properly looked after because of all the private practice. I speak as an older person who requires dental services. I once tried to get treatment privately, when it was going to be a few months before I could get an appointment with my national health service dentist. The work that needed done was going to cost £1,000. Older people are in great need of more NHS dentists. I do not see why dentists—because of all the money that has gone into their training—should not do some NHS work at the beginning of their career. It is now almost impossible to get an NHS dentist.

The Convener: That is well on the record now—thank you.

Bill Kidd: This has been a tremendous, interesting session that points to the fact that the Equal Opportunities Committee has a real role to play in the Parliament. We are emphasising the requirement for people of different backgrounds, cultures and lifestyles to be integrated into the

same society. We need to mainstream as much as possible so that, rather than our having to point out issues such as this all the time, people have respect for others as a matter of course. That is important.

John Thompson: I thank Bill Kidd for that. There is a very good energy around the table, and there are opportunities for many further discussions. I acknowledge what Sara O'Loan is saying about younger and older people—we need to build bridges around the issue, and to be in touch with one another and learn from one another more.

Bill Wilson: Sandra White made a point about evidence. It would be useful if there was hard evidence of the discrimination in housing for young people that John Loughton and Sara O'Loan described.

It occurs to me that many elderly people may have difficulty moving home because of the lack of homes with suitable access, such as wheelchair access. We could do with some hard evidence on whether individuals are being discriminated against in access to housing because of their age, at either end of the spectrum.

The Convener: That is a good point.

Sara O'Loan: It has been useful to talk about these issues together. Other participants are from groups that, to be honest, would not be likely partners, even when we are talking about the same issues. There is not a great deal of contact. I reiterate my hope that there will be a lot of further work and discussion in this area. I highlight a conference that is taking place in Edinburgh on 29 March, called "Equality of Age: The LGBT Way". The conference is organised by Age Concern Scotland, the Equality Network and LGBT Youth Scotland, and it will consider age across the spectrum, from an LGBT perspective.

The Convener: We will allow you that official plug.

Marlyn Glen: I like the fact that the conference is taking in so many different areas. This has been an interesting and useful session, but I have nothing else to add.

Jonathan Sher: I thank the committee for its invitation. My concluding comment is that so much of what I see in Scotland—you might have noticed that I do not have a Scottish accent—

The Convener: We did notice.

Hugh O'Donnell: It is getting there.

Jonathan Sher: Aye, right.

It is clear to me that Scotland has a remarkably good set of laws and policies, with very good intentions. There is, however, a need for focus on

implementation so that all the good intentions turn into equally good realities. As we are only human, there will be slips twixt cup and lip. Parliament, like the rest of us, needs to focus on how to improve implementation. The basic framework of values, intentions, laws and policies is really good.

Hugh O'Donnell: It has been interesting to hear at some length input from people who are probably much more expert in their fields than we are. I note in particular the lack of solid evidence, to which various contributors have referred. Those organisations that feel that there is a gap in the research that is required to allow us to make informed decisions about the development of policy and practice should be knocking at the doors of St Andrews house and Victoria Quay very loudly in seek of support. Any approaches that are made to back up that claim could perhaps be supported by the committee.

The Convener: I thank all the participants for their contributions, which I and the committee found immensely worth while. I offer you the opportunity to make further submissions to the clerks if you have any concrete examples or wish to tell us about anything else that you did not manage to say today but think of later, or about anything else that you wish to follow up. We will pore over the evidence in the *Official Report* and discuss the round-table discussion, which is a superb way to discuss a spectrum of issues concerning age. We can take into account any follow-up information and practical examples.

I will finish with a word of reassurance, to encourage Jonathan Sher. The committee takes on board his words about implementation. The disability inquiry is an example of the committee trying to ensure that, as well as there being a good policy, that policy is implemented. We have gone through all the cabinet secretaries and every portfolio, and we have held every minister and cabinet secretary to account in trying to ensure progress with our recommendations. I hope that we can do the same with respect to age. Thank you all very much for your attendance. It is much appreciated.

11:08

Meeting suspended.

11:19

On resuming—

Disability Inquiry

The Convener: Agenda item 4 is our final scheduled evidence-taking session on the implementation of the recommendations in our predecessor committee's disability inquiry report. I am pleased to welcome John Swinney, the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth. Mr Swinney is supported today by Bill Brash and Fiona Locke from the Scottish Government and Alastair Young from Transport Scotland, who are also welcome.

I invite the cabinet secretary to make a brief opening statement before we move to questions from members.

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): It is my pleasure to give evidence to the committee on the report that its predecessor committee produced in the previous session of Parliament. The inquiry covered a broad range of issues and I will not attempt to go into every element of the evidence in my opening remarks. I will respond to questions from members.

I emphasise that the commitment to delivering equality for people with disabilities is shared across the Government. We are working in every area of the Administration to ensure that we tackle appropriately the Government's statutory duties to ensure equality for people with disabilities and that we make interventions in policy areas to tackle relevant issues where we need to improve performance. Our focus is on ensuring that we tackle the issue by delivering a mainstreamed approach, that we work throughout the public sector on implementing our duties in respect of equalities and that we do that as part and parcel of the working and operating priorities of public sector organisations.

The report covers a broad cross-section of matters. In relation to my responsibilities, today we are looking at, predominantly, transport, volunteering, tourism and employment—in respect of access to work—although I will be happy to answer questions that the committee has on other issues.

We are working with people with disabilities and their representative organisations to ensure that the agenda is taken forward effectively within the Government. I look forward to working to ensure that, in the course of the Administration's term of office, we not only deliver our duties in relation to tackling issues of equality for people with disabilities but take positive and active steps to ensure that we improve access to public services

and opportunities for them. I will be delighted to answer the committee's questions.

The Convener: Thank you for your opening statement and for the written submission and answers that you gave the committee on aspects of the recommendations relating to physical access.

I will start with the report's recommendations on access to work. What is the Scottish Government doing actively to encourage disabled people to enter the job market? The question relates specifically to recommendation 9.

John Swinney: Our purpose as an Administration is to increase sustainable economic growth in Scotland. We have a particular opportunity to make progress by ensuring that we motivate those who are currently economically inactive to enter the labour market and to become economically active.

Many people who have disabilities are unable to access the labour market because of impediments and the lack of facilities in and access to different employment situations. Part of the challenge that the Government faces is to ensure that we do everything in our power to make it as practical as possible for individuals who are excluded from the labour market to gain access to employment. We are taking forward priorities in a number of areas.

The work that we are undertaking through a dialogue with stakeholders and interested organisations is designed to identify barriers to employment for people with disabilities. I know that the committee has discussed the skills development agenda with Fiona Hyslop. We aim to try to ensure that we have, essentially, a seamless approach to creating routes for individuals to gain access to employment through skills development.

One of the impediments that we have to get over is that of ensuring that our policies and those of, for example, the Department for Work and Pensions, are properly aligned. We must not put in place, through our decisions, structures that individuals use only to find that they run counter to DWP rules. We are trying to ensure that there is common ground, so that we can guarantee that it is easier for people to gain access to employment.

The Convener: You will be aware that recommendation 9 sprang out of a concern that, although the fresh talent initiative was promoted in order to bring people into the country to increase the size of the workforce, we were not exploiting our pool of talented disabled people. Are you confident that a balance has been struck?

John Swinney: I take the committee's point that some people in our society are economically inactive. Many different obstacles prevent people

from gaining access to employment: some have drug and alcohol problems; some have mental health problems; and for others physical disabilities are the obstacle.

We have to encourage employers. There is a lot of activity in different public sector organisations to find ways in which people can make a meaningful contribution. In the private sector, there have been some fantastic initiatives for people with disabilities. Not so long ago, I visited a distillery in which the bottling line had been designed so that people with physical disabilities could work on it. In one fell swoop, about half a dozen people with disabilities entered the labour market. I welcome and applaud that initiative. It was one intervention by one company, but such practical interventions in the private sector will make it possible to employ disabled people.

The public sector has an equal duty to make it possible and practical for people to enter the labour market. That is a continuing priority for us. I assure the committee that the Government will not do anything to give priority to one element of our policies without ensuring that access to employment for disabled people is considered fully and effectively. Without a doubt, we have a real talent base that we are not utilising properly.

The Convener: The example that you gave is welcome. Highlighting good practice will raise awareness and perhaps encourage others to utilise the skills of disabled people in a similar way.

Sandra White: I want to ask about access to work as well. The cabinet secretary has just been speaking about routes into work for individuals. Obviously, the DWP has responsibility for that as well.

Petition PE1069 calls for the promotion of opportunities for disabled people to work from home. Could information on working from home be included in information that is sent to businesses? If businesses then disseminated that information, it could make life easier for people who currently find it difficult to access work.

John Swinney: The Government's election manifesto contained the aspiration of encouraging more flexible working and more home working. There were many reasons behind the aspiration, such as having less congestion on the roads into our cities in the mornings and making a positive contribution to reducing our carbon footprint. If, procedurally and structurally, organisations—including public sector organisations—accepted more home working, it is clear that people with disabilities would have more opportunities to become active in the labour market.

11:30

When we talk of home working, one issue that we have to watch and guard against is isolation. We have to strike a balance between the benefits of home working and the risk of isolation. In another forum, when I was making the argument for more home working, a member of the public reminded me—vigorously—of the risk of isolation. People with disabilities can feel isolated in the community. If we try to ensure access for them to a place of employment, we may tackle that sense of isolation.

Within the parameters of that approach, there is a good deal more that we can do to make it possible for individuals to gain access to economic activity through home working. The Government is working to try to encourage more home working and more flexible working, in both the private and public sectors. We will continue to take forward that work. I take on board Sandra White's suggestion that we should encourage and motivate businesses in that regard. The suggestion fits well with the convener's reflection on the employment opportunities that I saw on my visit to the distillery. We have to beat the drum for success by highlighting good practice where we see it and encouraging others to follow suit.

Elaine Smith: On the issue of isolation, it is important to differentiate between different sorts of home working. Someone with a job at the Parliament may be able to work from home, which would help to address congestion and the other issue that you raised. However, exploitation of home workers was recently brought to my attention again. Trade unions cannot organise for home workers and the minimum wage may not apply to them. We need to bear those issues in mind when we discuss home working.

John Swinney: The point is absolutely valid and was well made. In all the interventions that we make, we have to be careful to take proper account of the protection of individuals' rights. As a society, we have to undertake that obligation.

The Convener: I turn to recommendation 10. What monitoring or evaluation has been done to assess the extent to which the recommendation that

"the enterprise agencies fully integrate disability into all their future policies, initiatives and publicity material"

has been met?

John Swinney: The enterprise agencies have taken on board that recommendation. Their mainstream work and priorities reflect an approach that is designed to be inclusive for people with disabilities. That chimes with what I said in my opening statement.

On monitoring, we maintain regular contact with the equality officers at Scottish Enterprise and

Highlands and Islands Enterprise. As a consequence, we can supervise closely the equality matters in business programme that emerged from those discussions. Scottish Enterprise has published its "Equal Opportunities Annual Report 2007", which is the second such report. We have requested a similar report from Highlands and Islands Enterprise, which is in preparation.

We want to ensure that the agencies undertake the work. Obviously, they have a significant contribution to make in the wider dissemination of our agenda on motivating more people, including disabled people, to become active in the labour market. We will supervise the role of the agencies in that context.

The Convener: In recommendation 15, the committee proposed that the Scottish Executive should work with the Equality and Human Rights Commission

"to raise awareness and provide information and advice to employers on the employment of disabled people"

and that

"the enterprise agencies should establish networks with employers' organisations to disseminate information and examples of good practice."

What progress has been made on the two aspects of the recommendation?

John Swinney: Scottish Enterprise has worked to raise awareness of disability issues among employers. In October last year, it hosted a conference on mental health considerations being an obstacle to individuals entering the labour market. About 150 organisations attended the event, 45 per cent of which were from the private sector. The event focused on ensuring that those who attended were made aware of workplace issues in relation to people with mental health difficulties. Best practice was shared on how to address and support people with such challenges.

Highlands and Islands Enterprise is planning joint activity with the Highland employer coalition to promote the employability of disabled people—that work is continuing. Both enterprise networks are involved in the equality matters in business project. There is a further contribution to be made to that project by the enterprise networks. We will evaluate the work that has been undertaken to assess its effectiveness and determine what difference it has made in helping to address the challenges that individuals face.

The Convener: It would be useful to get your response to a comment by the Federation of Small Businesses. It said that it has not seen any significant improvement in the area, and specifically that there has been no progress on the recommendation to establish

"networks with employers' organisations to disseminate information and examples of good practice."

The FSB said:

"the definition of the range of disabilities is something that continues to be unclear to many of our members."

John Swinney: All of us, and particularly those in the business community, operate in an environment in which time is precious. I make a point that is a hallmark of many of my contributions to parliamentary debates: we can put in place structures that are just too cumbersome. I am not suggesting that the networking opportunity that you mentioned should not exist, but I would rather that we just got on with the task of engaging with people and companies.

In mentioning what Scottish Enterprise and Highlands and Islands Enterprise are doing, I cited two examples of productive activity that is designed to address the issue rather than to create another structure that would have to be serviced, would become another priority and another part of the infrastructure and would contribute to the overall bureaucracy. I would rather that we did things and created positive outcomes as a consequence.

The enterprise networks are trying to incorporate positive thinking into their areas of activity. Frankly, I would rather that they concentrated on best practice and said to employers, "Look at what's possible. Here's an example. Look at what can be done." They should motivate others to play a part. A great deal more can be achieved in that way.

If the committee has a specific concern that the FSB has highlighted, I will of course be happy to look into it in further detail and provide the committee with further information, if that would be helpful.

The Convener: Your comments are sensible and I am sure that the FSB will be encouraged by them. You said that there is continuing engagement so that activity in this area becomes almost a norm rather than something that is set apart.

John Swinney: Correct.

Hugh O'Donnell: Will the changes to the structure of Scottish Enterprise have implications for those who are responsible for implementing the employment strategy?

John Swinney: It is likely that the only impact will be greater cohesion in what goes on. One difficulty posed by the local enterprise company structure was the fact that the task of conveying messages throughout the organisations and getting buy-in to those messages was often challenging. With the new structure that we are putting in place, the leadership of Scottish

Enterprise will have a greater opportunity to do that work. It is clear that Scottish Enterprise is involved in the area of work that we are discussing.

If my memory serves me correctly, the chief executive of Scottish Enterprise reported to the convener of the previous Equal Opportunities Committee on performance in that area. The reforms that we have introduced will provide Scottish Enterprise with a much more cohesive opportunity to spread the message directly, through the enterprise network.

The Convener: We move on to the issue of career progression.

Sandra White: The inquiry heard contradictory evidence on the career progression prospects of disabled people in employment and recommended that the previous Executive carry out research to establish whether there was a disparity between disabled and non-disabled people in employment. Has such research been carried out? If so, what were the findings?

John Swinney: We have not carried out any more research, for the simple reason that the available research pretty much tells us the story. Although I am sure that some members of the Parliament would like the Government to engage in endless studies by consultants, the Government takes the view that the available research confirms the central point of the committee's recommendation—that there is a real disparity in career progression between people with disabilities and non-disabled people.

Tabulating the problem again will not take us any further forward. We must advance the arguments for a more inclusive approach to people with disabilities and ensure that there are no impediments or barriers to their advancement in the labour market. We can address those issues in the public sector, where we must meet certain obligations to ensure that individuals have proper access to opportunities. There are many areas in which both private and public sector organisations could do more to tackle the problem. I would rather focus on constructive interventions than on rehearsing the extent of the problem that exists.

Marlyn Glen: The recommendation was not just about counting numbers. Do you not agree that research is important, as it provides us with a baseline and measurements that have been tested? We can use that baseline to test whether the situation has improved. If we do not have a baseline in the first place, we cannot know whether what we have done has made a difference.

John Swinney: In 2005, the previous Administration published "Disability and Employment in Scotland: A Review of the

Evidence Base". The information that is available to me indicates that the review gave a pretty comprehensive picture of the extent of the problem and can provide us with a baseline. I agree that we must focus on delivering action to address the issue, but I am satisfied that the current evidence base quantifies the scale of the problem and the challenge that we face. The real issue is to ensure that we make progress in tackling the problem.

Sandra White: I am pleased that Marlyn Glen raised the issue of baselines, because I was planning to mention the 2005 report. Every year, John Wheatley College monitors the situation to see who has and has not been promoted. That is a good approach. The 2005 report bore out the disability inquiry's conclusion that fewer opportunities are available to disabled people. The committee is seeking a guarantee that action will be taken to close the gap that exists, to ensure that disabled people are not overlooked for promotion—the report indicates that that is happening—and that their career prospects improve.

11:45

John Swinney: I come back to my point that the evidence base supports that proposition and the committee's concern. The challenge is to ensure that we create the circumstances and culture in employment that enable us to make progress on the matter. That is the nub of it for me. Employers, whether in the private or public sector, must make it as practical as possible for individuals with disabilities to progress within the labour market. As well as continuing to take steps to expand the range of opportunities for people with disabilities to gain access to employment, we must intensify those efforts to ensure that the problem that the evidence base highlights is addressed more urgently than it has been to date.

Sandra White: I do not want to labour that point, because I know about the report that you mentioned and the work that is going on at John Wheatley College, which is encouraging employers to take a stance such as it has taken by monitoring and ensuring that career prospects exist for disabled people. I am sure that the committee will come back to that at some point.

The Convener: We will move on to questions on access to leisure.

Sandra White: I will ask about the tourism review. The report recommended that

"In order to increase provision of services to disabled people"

the relevant Scottish Executive minister—that is you now, cabinet secretary—

"and VisitScotland should develop, as part of the tourism review, a strategy to promote Scotland as an accessible destination to potential disabled visitors both from home and abroad".

We saw some evidence that disabled visitors, particularly those from home, could not access ferry services, for instance, and that the VisitScotland website did not always say which boarding houses and hotels were disabled-person friendly. What is your view of services—including VisitScotland's services—for disabled visitors, and has any strategy been considered or developed?

John Swinney: Since the report was published, VisitScotland has established a standing group that is used as a channel for input from people with disabilities to the disability equality scheme that it has run since 2006. The group has met three times since January 2007 and primarily focuses its attention on meeting disabled people's needs for tourism information services. That work is designed to improve access to information such as the web-based information on suitable destinations and facilities that Sandra White highlighted.

The VisitScotland disability equality scheme sets out VisitScotland's approach to fulfilling its general duty to promote equality of opportunity between disabled people and others, eliminate discrimination and ensure that it promotes positive attitudes towards, and participation by, disabled people in the life of our community.

In addition, VisitScotland is considering redesigning its disability equality scheme to ensure that the organisation takes a much more comprehensive approach than has been taken to date. Ideally, an individual with disabilities should be able to access very easily the type of information that they require to have at their disposal before they make a trip. Obviously, web-based technology allows us to provide exactly that information.

Sandra White: I know that you will go on to discuss transport, but one point that was raised under the tourism review was the need for ferries and other public transport services to be wheelchair friendly. I raise the issue because it comes under the tourism remit, but I know that you will respond to that fully later on so I will leave it until we come on to questions on the transport strategy.

Our predecessor committee recommended that the Scottish Executive's volunteering strategy be reviewed to ensure that it promotes and encourages the participation of disabled people in volunteering. How has that recommendation been progressed? Will there be any opportunity for people with disabilities to volunteer during the Glasgow Commonwealth games in 2014?

John Swinney: There are great opportunities to make significant progress. A cross-Government submission is to be made to ministers, providing options for the review of the volunteering strategy. That will come to ministers before the end of the month—we are awaiting that now.

On volunteering generally, I announced last week some of the allocations to the third sector. To me, the third sector offers a broad range of opportunities to encourage volunteering, particularly for people with disabilities. It comprises a flexible set of organisations that are very attuned and attentive to finding practical solutions to the challenges that individuals face in our society. I am confident that ways to enhance and support volunteering will emerge from the organisations that support volunteering in Scotland—Volunteer Development Scotland comes to mind.

We will be looking for opportunities to encourage people with disabilities to become involved in volunteering. The evidence trail is clear that, if an economically inactive individual becomes involved in volunteering and has a good experience, they will end up in the labour market. That is why I attach such significance to the third sector tackling some of the challenges and encouraging people who are economically inactive and who have disabilities to enter the labour market.

Your specific point about the Glasgow 2014 games was excellent—a really super point. I will certainly feed back to the officials who are involved in our constructive discussions with Glasgow City Council and the Commonwealth games organising committee the importance of reflecting on the opportunities for people with disabilities to become involved in the 2014 games. There are admirable examples of individuals with disabilities taking part in sporting activities—with more zeal than some of us these days—which shows what can be achieved. Glasgow 2014 will provide a great platform, and I will ensure that those involved are aware of the suggestion.

The Convener: The committee will be interested to see that correspondence.

We move on to the huge cross-cutting issue of transport. You may be interested to know that, before your evidence, we had a round-table discussion on age. There were older and younger representatives, and transport was mentioned. It is certainly timeous that you are attending the committee so we can put the issues to you directly.

Hugh O'Donnell: Are we any closer to achieving equality of mobility for disabled people than we were in 2006 when the committee's report was published? Do we have an appropriate strategy to create parity of mobility for disabled people within the Government's overall transport strategy?

John Swinney: I think that we are making progress. I am not going to sit here and say that the job is completed, because it clearly is not. We have enormous physical challenges in our transport infrastructure, but I think that we are making progress.

I attended a bus summit this morning, before I came here. It was essentially a gathering of key local authority people, the leaders of most of our major bus operating companies in Scotland and a variety of other interested parties, including the traffic commissioner. One point that I discussed with the bus operators was the steps that they are taking to ensure that the bus fleet is replenished regularly and in a way that is mindful of the needs of people with disabilities.

I know from my constituency experience that there is now a broader range of services. Buses have low floors and are wheelchair accessible so that people in wheelchairs can easily gain access to a comfortable and secure place for their journey. In that respect, progress has been made in a number of areas, which I am sure we will explore in more detail.

The Government's national transport strategy, which we were happy to inherit from our predecessors and which we have given a commitment to follow, makes it clear that the delivery of service must take full account of the six strands of equalities, which ensures that adequate account is taken of the needs of people with disabilities. That runs through the policy approaches that have been taken.

Within the new national performance framework, we are testing the Government and the public sector in general on our ability to achieve major outcomes, one of which is to have tackled the significant inequalities in Scottish society. So, right at the heart of the key elements on which the performance of the Government in making Scotland a more successful country will be judged and measured is the outcome that we have tackled the significant inequalities in Scottish society. There will be a number of measures by which to assess whether we are making progress in that respect.

The Convener: This morning, the ageing stock of some bus companies was mentioned. It was suggested that if users could be told that a user-friendly bus—as opposed to a double decker that would be inappropriate for those who are less mobile or who use wheelchairs—would definitely turn up at a specific time, that would go a tremendous way towards servicing the need without having to replace the stock with buses that are practical for those with mobility issues.

John Swinney: That is a helpful point. I understand that the Traveline Scotland information

will shortly include information on whether the vehicle that serves a particular route is accessible to people with disabilities. I am pretty sure that that is not far from being implemented. That will go some way towards addressing the issue.

I feel obliged to point out on behalf of the various bus operators, who made the point to me quite forcefully this morning, that they are investing in significant refurbishment and replenishment of the fleet. In all the decisions that they make on interventions, they will be mindful of the need to fulfil their obligations in relation to disabled access. We all accept that it is impossible for bus operators to replenish the entire fleet in one fell swoop, but good progress is being made. The information that will soon be made available by Traveline Scotland will, I hope, address the issue as well.

The Convener: That is encouraging. Thank you.

Hugh O'Donnell: You referred to the aspiration to make Scotland a more equal place. When you assess the progress that has been made, what baselines will you use to measure success or otherwise?

Further to the point that you have just made, have the bus companies given a timescale for making their fleets fully accessible to people with disabilities?

John Swinney: I do not have information on how long it will take for the entire bus fleet to be made accessible to people with disabilities. I am not sure whether I could be given a definitive timescale even if I asked, although I will make inquiries on that point.

Work on the baseline has been going on for some time. We inherited progress on the issue that the previous Administration had encouraged. I could draw a baseline today, but that would not take into account the progress that has already been made. A rising number of the vehicles that are being used are fully accessible to people with physical disabilities, and the Government is taking steps to encourage that rise to continue. That is part of the focus of the discussion that is going on at the bus summit in my absence.

12:00

Hugh O'Donnell: Is a policy in place to incentivise or penalise those who do not expedite the progress of disability access, or are discussions on that taking place? I realise that it is much easier to incentivise people in the public sector, but has any progress been made on that?

John Swinney: I am much more the incentivising than the penalising type because in my experience penalising does not really work.

The Government encourages a variety of players in the transport network to progress disability access. In that network, we try to do as much as we can with the available resources to ensure that we deliver as much progress as possible.

There is tremendous willingness to make progress on disability access. This morning, we discussed ensuring that the bus industry, for example, works with local authorities as part of the Government's agenda to try to improve the performance of the network to satisfy the various needs of individuals, which include, of course, the needs of individuals with disabilities. The Government takes that process seriously. It is engaging partners within the national outcomes framework, through which we have given a clear steer to people about what we want them to achieve. We cannot state the importance of the national outcomes too frequently. The Government has given a message to all organisations in the public and private sectors about what we want to deliver and achieve, and about the difference that we want to make. We encourage others to play a part in assisting us to achieve our aims.

Hugh O'Donnell: Do you have an example of a specific incentive to progress disability access, as opposed to the encouragement that is provided?

John Swinney: We are investing heavily in all public transport activities. We are investing heavily in infrastructure and in the operation of services in the rail and bus sectors and, as a result of our priorities, we take steps to allocate resources to encourage different players in the transport services to ensure that they deliver on our expectations. No specific grant allocation is available to progress disability access at the moment, if that is what the member is asking about, but we are using our policy framework to ensure that organisations recognise the importance of their contributions to delivering on the Government's objectives.

Elaine Smith: I would like to press you a wee bit further on joined-up transport. We do not have nationalised public transport, so we must accept the reality that there are local and regional differences around the country. I refer to your answer to the previous question. How can the Government ensure that there is appropriate co-ordination across the different transport operators and geographic boundaries to maintain an effective chain of accessibility for disabled people?

John Swinney: In accepting that we are where we are—and we are definitely there—

Hugh O'Donnell: That is profound.

John Swinney: I assure members that I am full of profundities today.

The discussion that Stewart Stevenson and I had this morning with the key players around the transport table was designed to achieve that co-ordination. It is sheer coincidence that we had a discussion with the bus sector this morning—on another day, we could easily have had a discussion with the rail sector. We are working to ensure that the considerations of different organisations and what they can contribute to achieving the Government's objectives are aligned. There is no point in our putting money into services without saying to people, "Look. This is what we want you to achieve as a consequence." That is why we have moved to the outcomes framework.

The discussion at the forum today drew together all the key players to try to ensure that we establish common approaches and styles of doing business. I know that there are some examples of terrible transport integration but, equally, there are some great examples. The forum that we addressed this morning is trying to encourage the sharing of information and experience of good practice, to encourage ever-better practice. That is the approach that we are taking.

Elaine Smith: You mentioned this morning's bus summit. In recommendation 107, the committee stressed the need actively to involve disabled people

"in the strategic development, design, implementation and monitoring of all transport services across Scotland".

Was there any representation of that issue at the summit? Have you considered how you could tackle it in the future?

John Swinney: I am keen to ensure that we hear the views and have the input of all people who use our public transport. That is part of the Government's approach. I will certainly be keen to ensure that we have adequate and appropriate input to transport planning from people with disabilities—it is a central issue.

I came away from the discussions this morning hugely encouraged by the willingness of bus operators to make a contribution. Bus operators want to transport as many people as possible. If they can make it easier for members of the public with disabilities to use those services, I detected a willingness to make that possible.

Elaine Smith: You mentioned the outcome agreements in relation to your discussions this morning. Recommendation 106 was about the monitoring of the equality impact assessments in relation to the transport plans of regional transport partnerships. Has that been set aside or will you still pursue it?

John Swinney: The guidance that we issued to all regional transport partnerships asks that they

undertake an equality impact assessment as part of the development of their regional transport strategies. I can confirm that all seven of the draft strategies that have been submitted to the Government, and to which we have responded, include equality impact assessments. There is willingness in the RTPs to do that.

Elaine Smith: Should there be a requirement to enshrine such assessments in legislation, or are you happy that it is working?

John Swinney: I will reserve my position on that until I see what the pattern of performance is. We have to make progress on such issues and encourage different organisations to play their part. If we feel that there is poor performance, it is clear that legislation is a route that we can take, to create a statutory duty.

Elaine Smith: Public transport is extremely important to lots of people, especially disabled people. Some people might not have a car, or be able to afford one, or want one for environmental reasons. As was pointed out in our earlier session this morning, although bus passes for older people are welcome, they depend on their being able to get on and off buses. There might not be any bus services in some villages. Elderly people in one part of my constituency have to walk, but I will not go into that.

You are trying to join up transport, but people will not be able to use their bus passes on the trams. On trains, there is a discount fare rather than a free scheme. Do you envision something similar for the trams?

John Swinney: Some issues remain to be resolved, particularly in relation to the trams—a hot subject if ever there was one. We will look at those questions and other wider ones about access to concessionary travel, which I know the committee has concerns about. We will reflect on your points.

Elaine Smith: The committee highlighted in its report a concern that the service quality and incentive regime—SQUIRE—that Transport Scotland uses to assess the performance of rail transport services covers only some accessibility criteria, and recommended that that regime be amended to cover the full range of accessibility criteria. Can you or, indeed, Alastair Young tell us whether that has been done? I refer to recommendation 108 in the committee's report.

John Swinney: Transport Scotland examined the issue in 2007 and sought opportunities to use SQUIRE inspectors to perform additional checks relating to accessibility and to provide information about them to First ScotRail. The additional checks were to ensure that wheelchair spaces on trains were left in the default position—that they were available to wheelchair users. Checks were

also undertaken at stations to ensure that the accessibility information that had been provided by First ScotRail accurately described the situation for members of the public with disabilities and was easily understood. That was essentially an extra element to what the SQUIRE inspectors were doing.

The franchise agreement between the Scottish ministers and First ScotRail has been effective from October 2004. If we wished to enforce any additional changes, that would be a variation from the contract that we have established with First ScotRail and it would result in a direct additional cost on the Scottish ministers. As we examine the First ScotRail franchise in due course, and as we assess what could be delivered through such an approach, we will ensure that those issues are properly considered.

Elaine Smith: So you will be consulting further—

John Swinney: We will certainly look at the situation. Work has been undertaken despite the fact that there is no real contract provision for it. I hope that the committee will acknowledge Transport Scotland's willingness to make progress. As we consider the franchise, we will examine the issues involved further.

Elaine Smith: Thank you.

Hugh O'Donnell: How many of Scotland's railway stations are now fully accessible to disabled people?

John Swinney: I am not sure that I can give you a definitive answer, but I will aim to do so. I cannot give you a definitive total just now, but I can tell you that, last year, a further two stations—Barrhead and Cupar—were added to the programme for taking part in the access for all scheme. The current work-in-progress list is Dalmuir, Kirkcaldy, Motherwell, Mount Florida, Rutherglen and Stirling. Works at those stations are due to be completed by March 2009.

There are more than 130 stations in Scotland that do not have step-free access to all platforms, so we have a major challenge ahead of us. I have just given you a list of stations where initiatives are being taken as part of the access for all programme. That work is directed by the Department for Transport—it is a reserved area. Through Transport Scotland, we suggest particular stations that would benefit from such interventions. We imagine that that approach will continue for some time to come.

Hugh O'Donnell: Do we have a timescale for when we expect Scotland's railway stations to be universally accessible?

12:15

John Swinney: We do not have a target or an estimate of the timescale that is likely. There is a 10-year programme of activity that will permit Network Rail to invest approximately £39 million in improving access to Scotland's stations. I mentioned the list of work for the period until 2009. There will be a further tranche of proposals for investment between 2009 and 2014, and Transport Scotland is working on the identification of appropriate stations for that investment. I suppose that I have inadvertently publicised that, so if members want to make a pitch for a particular station to be assessed by Transport Scotland for the next funding tranche, they should do so sooner rather than later. We aim to make progress as quickly as possible in the context of the resources that are available.

The Administration makes other interventions through Transport Scotland in relation to work to improve stations. As part of such exercises, if there is more that we can do to improve access for people with disabilities we will pursue those opportunities.

Hugh O'Donnell: You have answered the final question that I intended to ask, so I will focus instead on school transport. I am interested in the provision of accessible buses, given what we have said about the quality of the fleet and the contractual nature of school transport arrangements. What pressure can the Government bring to bear to ensure that school transport is as accessible as we intend public transport to be?

John Swinney: I am unable to guarantee that every child with physical disabilities who goes to school will be transported in a school bus, because it would be practically and logistically difficult for us to deliver that. However, I am pretty certain that local authorities endeavour to deliver the requirements of all children who have special needs in relation to school transport. I would be surprised to hear that that was not the case and I would investigate further.

Sandra White: I asked about ferries in the context of a discussion about tourism, and we heard evidence about joined-up thinking and so on. During its disability inquiry, the Equal Opportunities Committee in the previous session of the Parliament heard that people who try to phone the ferry companies sometimes cannot get hold of the right contact, and that people have had to wait at the bottom of the jetty, flashing their car headlights to alert staff that they need help with a wheelchair. That is not acceptable.

We also heard that on a ferry that had been upgraded, the only place for a wheelchair was right next to one of the poles—I do not know what

they are called. During a fabulous sail to the islands, the passenger's only view was of the pole, so she could not take much pleasure from the upgraded ferry. Will you consider such issues?

John Swinney: Those are fair points. The committee asked us to consider the availability of travel information in accessible formats, to support people with disabilities. Transport Scotland continues to develop travel information services, either by providing information directly or by funding other organisations, such as Traffic Scotland and Traveline Scotland—which I mentioned—to provide information.

Work is in progress to dedicate a section of the Traveline Scotland site to accessibility issues, such as information on accessibility in bus stations, railway stations, ferry terminals and airports. I hope that in all circumstances in which an individual with disabilities was travelling, every endeavour would be made to ensure that they were accommodated and supported properly.

The disabled persons protection policy, which was reviewed in 2007, is designed to ensure that people with disabilities are able to obtain the proper assistance they require while they are travelling. If there are any gaps in that provision, we would be happy to consider them.

Bill Wilson: You have obligingly answered in considerable detail the first question that I was going to ask, so I will skip on to my next one.

Recommendation 117 is that the Scottish Executive should

“introduce and ensure the enforcement of minimum national standards in relation to staff training in disability equality and the provision of suitable customer care for disabled travellers”.

Are any such national standards now in place?

John Swinney: The national transport strategy referred specifically to the introduction of training, particularly for bus drivers in Scotland. It is to ensure, for example, that people are given enough time to get on a bus and to be comfortable and secure before the driver moves off. Training has been recommended in the strategy and work on it continues.

I said to Sandra White that it is incumbent on operators, such as ferry service operators, to take into account the circumstances of people with disabilities. I have seen a large number of laudable examples, particularly in the rail network and the bus network, of care being taken to ensure that people with disabilities are supported properly. That is a priority for service operators. If there was a concern that that was not functioning properly, the Government would be prepared to consider carefully any issues that might arise.

Bill Wilson: Interestingly, when we took evidence on age we heard that people do not have

enough time to get on buses and have difficulty keeping their feet when the driver decides to take off without warning.

John Swinney: I do not disagree that that is a concern for members of the public. I am happy to look into whether appropriate training infrastructure is in place that will guarantee that people are being given enough time to get on to buses and so on. I would have thought that it was a pretty elementary part of operators' duties of care and safety provision to ensure that care is taken before drivers move off.

Bill Wilson: We all agree with that.

Recommendation 118 is that

“the Scottish Executive should encourage all transport providers to implement ... suitable monitoring programmes to ensure that Disability Equality Training has the desired impact”.

That relates to what we have just discussed. What action does the Government plan to take to ensure that such monitoring takes place?

John Swinney: Last June, First ScotRail, in association with the Disability Rights Commission, conducted a survey of travel for disabled people and held a conference to discuss the results. There is on-going work on undertaking such assessments, which individual operators will take forward. Transport Scotland manages the ScotRail franchise. First ScotRail has recently undertaken what could be characterised as a mystery-shopper exercise to see how disabled individuals are dealt with. That is an effective test of whether approaches have been properly taken forward. Obviously, that is not a one-off: such exercises must be used systematically to ensure that provision is appropriate and that operators of transport systems are taking appropriate approaches and are taking into account the needs of people with disabilities.

Bill Kidd: My first question relates to recommendations 119 and 120. Sheila Fletcher of the Community Transport Association has said that

“Demand-responsive transport and flexibly routed services are the ideal solution”

to the problems of disabled people, and that

“small, local, flexibly routed services is the key to success.”—[*Official Report, Equal Opportunities Committee*, 2 May 2006; c 1719.]

You might have answered my question when you talked about the disabled persons protection policy. Recommendation 119 said that the Scottish Administration should

“co-ordinate the development of properly funded, long-term, demand-responsive transport services across Scotland”.

What is being done to implement that recommendation? Has it been addressed? If not, how will that be done?

John Swinney: The Government funds several demand-responsive transport services through the DRT initiative and the rural community transport initiative. As part of better aligning and integrating public transport services, we decided to include such resources in the local government finance settlement, to give local authorities the opportunity to plan demand-responsive transport effectively in the context of the wider transport provision in a locality. Our judgment is that an opportunity exists to involve and immerse local authorities in planning and directing the formulation of new demand-responsive transport services.

A good amount of activity is going on but, to be blunt, it will never be enough. Some remote localities in my constituency would dearly love to have demand-responsive transport, but it is a comprehensive service to deliver. Initiatives are being taken and there are several very good examples of how such services are targeted at the needs of people with disabilities. The Government will continue to support that process through dialogue with local government, to ensure that councils are fully engaged in developing it.

Bill Kidd: Such services are particularly important to disabled people in rural areas.

John Swinney: Yes.

Bill Kidd: Recommendation 121 was that the Scottish Government

"make current and future demand-responsive transport services eligible for concessionary fares in line with the"

concessionary—I mean concessionary—fare scheme.

Sandra White: Concessionary?

Bill Kidd: Thank you. I tripped myself up, but I recovered.

Learning disabled people who receive the low-rate mobility element of disability living allowance and who regularly use public transport for social and employment reasons are having difficulties because that element is going. How will the Government address that?

John Swinney: I appreciate that the question raises issues about provision. A major review of the free bus travel scheme for older and disabled people will be undertaken in the forthcoming financial year. This Government did not initiate that—the previous Administration built it into the establishment of the national scheme. That review will provide the opportunity to consider the position of people who receive the low-rate disability payment. Extending the travel scheme would obviously have financial implications; the scheme

is already a pretty challenging financial undertaking for the Government.

12:30

The Convener: Before we leave demand-responsive transport services, have you had representations from the deafblind community? They have a dual sensory impairment and so often need to be accompanied by a carer or someone else, but that does not always happen on our travel services.

John Swinney: Mr Stevenson, the Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change, has received significant representations from Deafblind Scotland. We have discussed the issue and will examine it further as part of the review of the scheme to which I referred during my answer to Bill Kidd.

The Convener: Okay—that is very welcome.

Marlyn Glen: The committee report recommended that the Scottish Executive

"work with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities to encourage and support local authorities in providing concessionary taxi schemes."

What has the Scottish Government done on that?

John Swinney: Although I am certainly happy to enter into dialogue with COSLA on that, such schemes can really only be offered at the discretion of local authorities. We do not require local authorities to provide such facilities, although there will be examples of local authorities that do so. We have not actively pursued the issue with local authorities, but I would be happy to raise the issue with COSLA during our discussions.

Marlyn Glen: That would be helpful. To recap, the 2004 research showed that less than half of local authorities operate a concessionary taxi scheme, although it would seem to fit in with demand-responsive transport schemes. Sometimes a person might not be able to get a bus but could take a taxi, so a concessionary fares scheme could be important to older people and lots of people in rural communities. Access to a scheme should not depend on one's postcode.

John Swinney: I know that there are different levels of provision in different parts of the country, but it is a local issue. The previous Administration absorbed the various local authority concessionary fare schemes into a national scheme, but did not include that particular provision. I am certainly happy to consider the point, but I stress that, as it stands, it is a local issue.

Sandra White: Such a taxi scheme would be beneficial in rural areas, but would the taxis be suitable for disabled people? A lot of taxis in rural areas are private and do not suit disabled people.

John Swinney: Yes—that would be a challenge in rural areas, and it would have to be considered as part of the initiative.

Sandra White: Thank you.

Marlyn Glen: The report recommended that the “equalities criteria included in tender documents for transport services should be developed in conjunction with disabled people and the subsequent services monitored and evaluated against these criteria in consultation with the disabled travellers who use the services.”

Can you update the committee on that recommendation?

John Swinney: That goes back to my earlier comments about the First ScotRail franchise, which is the tendering exercise that the Administration has under its control. The franchise will run until 2011, with a possible extension until 2014, and when the contract is due for retender, the questions of disabled access will be reconsidered to determine what additional provision might be required.

The procurement or tendering process must ensure that there is no discrimination in relation to employment, so contractors and service providers must not discriminate unlawfully. That must be applied in all circumstances.

My final point relates to the investment process that we undertake through the Scottish transport appraisal guidance. That is being looked at again, and it will include the need to ensure that funding and approval for accessibility issues is adequately considered and that it is included in the infrastructure investment process. When we are making major investment, those issues are very much at the heart of our decisions.

Marlyn Glen: Funding is fundamental to that.

Evidence during the inquiry highlighted concerns regarding provision and use of accessible parking. The committee recommended that the Scottish Executive, COSLA and others identify and implement a suitable process to ensure the provision of adequate accessible parking for disabled people. What has the Scottish Government done to take that forward?

John Swinney: Some research has been undertaken under the umbrella of tackling the abuse of off-street parking for people with disabilities in Scotland. The aim of the research was to investigate abuse of parking bays that are reserved for people with disabilities and to consider measures that might be taken to address that. Jackie Baillie has proposed a member's bill on disabled persons' parking. We expect the bill to be published in the spring. The Government will give serious consideration to its provisions.

Marlyn Glen: That is encouraging. However, that is about abuse of parking spaces. There were

also concerns about the provision of spaces. Is there any progress on that?

John Swinney: That is really a matter for local authorities, which are trying to ensure that their accessibility commitments are fulfilled. The most effective way of doing that is to allow for local dialogue in individual areas about whether provision is adequate for people with disabilities. It would be difficult for the Government to try to direct or second-guess that. It is an issue in which local authorities should engage in dialogue with people with disabilities and their representative groups to determine what provision would be most appropriate. If there is an issue of abuse—which is what Jackie Baillie's bill is designed to address—it is one that the Government must consider in terms of legislative provisions. At this stage, however, the other issues are best left to local authorities.

Marlyn Glen: I understand that it is a local issue. I will not go into a particular example, but I know of areas in which the provision is inadequate. Will you try to encourage local authorities in that respect?

John Swinney: Yes, although I would be reluctant to go down the route of issuing further guidance, because we would be beginning to overspecify what is expected of authorities. We have a shared aspiration with authorities to ensure that our communities are as accessible as possible, and that individuals are able to be economically active, and involved in our communities. To do that, however, individuals may require disabled parking places in appropriate places. There is willingness by authorities around the country to try to address that point. The question whether provision is adequate is one for dialogue between representative groups and local authorities.

Bill Wilson: I want to highlight a matter that is related to that. As well as considering the availability of disabled parking, particularly for wheelchair users, we need to consider the availability of drop-down pavements. Disabled parking without such pavements is rather valueless. If we are considering protection for disabled parking spaces, it would also be useful to have protection for drop-down pavements, for example by making it easier to put double yellow lines beside them. The problem is often that, although there may be a drop-down pavement for the disabled parker to get their wheelchair into their car, if someone has parked over it, the effect is much the same as having been denied the disabled parking space in the first place.

John Swinney: That is a fair point. In considering such issues, we reach a point at which we just have to ask people to be decent and to think about other folk. No amount of guidance that is issued by the Scottish Government is going to

affect the practice that you mentioned. We can see with our own eyes the insensitivity that is displayed by some members of the public. Only individuals can take responsibility for that.

Marlyn Glen: Perhaps that is an example of a case where disincentives are needed. It is not just about encouragement.

John Swinney: We could have more double yellow lines, perhaps, but the last time I looked, some folk were still parking on double yellow lines.

Marlyn Glen: Has resourcing of the Mobility and Access Committee for Scotland been reviewed to ensure that it has the capacity to carry out its representative and advisory roles effectively?

John Swinney: Yes. In October 2006, when the then Scottish Executive prepared for the establishment of a joint secretariat for MACS and the Public Transport Users Committee for Scotland, it reviewed the number of staff and their gradings, roles and workload. It concluded that a remote secretariat of four seconded staff was adequate to cover the business of both MACS and the PTUC. In December 2007, a further review of the secretariat's workload concluded that the secretariat would be more efficient and effective if it was co-located with the transport directorate at Victoria Quay in Edinburgh. That change was made in February 2008. A dedicated staff of two is supplemented by management and administrative support as well as by policy input from throughout the directorate.

Marlyn Glen: Have you had any feedback on that? Have the changes been enough to support MACS's extensive roles, or is it too early to say?

John Swinney: The changes were made only last month and I have not had any immediate feedback or an update. However, examination of the matter showed that there was a need for the change to be undertaken.

Marlyn Glen: It would be interesting for the committee to follow that up.

The Convener: That concludes our questioning, cabinet secretary. I thank you for your evidence today and for offering to provide additional information. I also thank your officials for attending our meeting. It is safe to say that we are all encouraged by the progress that has been made in a huge number of key areas.

At a future meeting, the committee will consider all the evidence that it has taken, which dates back to December, when Stewart Maxwell came before us. We heard next from Fiona Hyslop, and our evidence taking has concluded today with John Swinney's evidence. We will decide what to do next.

12:43

Meeting continued in private until 13:02.

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