

EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE

Tuesday 13 January 2009

Session 3

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EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE

1st Meeting 2009, Session 3

CONVENER

*Margaret Mitchell (Central Scotland) (Con)

DEPUTY CONVENER

Elaine Smith (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Malcolm Chisholm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)

*Marlyn Glen (North East Scotland) (Lab)

*Bill Kidd (Glasgow) (SNP)

*Hugh O'Donnell (Central Scotland) (LD)

*Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP)

*Bill Wilson (West of Scotland) (SNP)

COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTES

Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Loudon) (SNP)

*Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

Margaret Smith (Edinburgh West) (LD)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO ATTENDED :

Camilla Kidner (Scottish Parliament Directorate of Access and Information)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Terry Shevlin

ASSISTANT CLERK

Rebecca Lamb

LOCATION

Committee Room 2

Scottish Parliament

Equal Opportunities Committee

Tuesday 13 January 2009

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

Sexual Imagery in Goods Aimed at Children

The Convener (Margaret Mitchell): Good morning and welcome to the first meeting of the Equal Opportunities Committee in 2009. I wish everyone a happy new year, and hope that it will be a good one for you.

I extend a warm welcome to Rebecca Lamb. She has taken over temporarily from Joanne Clinton, who has been seconded to the business team for three months. I look forward to working with Rebecca.

I remind all who are present that mobile phones and BlackBerrys should be switched off, as they interfere with the sound system even when they are switched to silent mode.

Agenda item 1 is consideration of a Scottish Parliament information centre paper on follow-up work by the committee on sexual imagery in goods that are aimed at children. Members will recall that in December, following a round-table discussion, we requested the paper. The paper sets out three broad options: commissioning external research, undertaking an inquiry and holding a committee event. I am pleased that Camilla Kidner from SPICe is here to answer members' questions on the paper.

Paragraph 18 of the paper invites us to decide what—if anything—we want to do next. Before we make that decision, I would welcome members' comments on the paper.

Hugh O'Donnell (Central Scotland) (LD): We have not much substantive evidence on which to base recommendations or actions. It would be a little bit contentious—to say the least—to make a decision without such evidence, so if we do anything to progress the issue, it should be in respect of the research agenda.

Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP): We need much more research, although I think there is some evidence that the goods we are talking about not only sexualise children, but harm them—boys and girls—and society. Research should be done.

I disagree with Tom Narducci's comments about questioning children. We must ask what age group

we are talking about. Children are still children at 12 or 14, but by that age they certainly have an idea about such matters. It would be good to ask for the views of kids of about 12 to 14 years of age, because they have gone through the earlier stage at the ages of 2, 3 and 4, which is unfortunately the age group at which many such goods are targeted. If we get enough research, I would like a debate on the issue in Parliament. It is important for everyone to have their say, so we should go ahead with research and we should not rule out taking evidence from school kids in the 12 to 14 age group.

I note the comments about the fact that retailers did not come to give the committee oral evidence. If they would be happy to give evidence in private, that would be fair enough—I would accept that approach—because we need to hear evidence from them. They sell the products.

The Convener: That is a fair point. The retailers made a fairly detailed submission, but concluded that the matter is nothing to do with them. As Sandra White says, perhaps research is what is needed first. We could then revisit the question about where the retailers fit in.

Marlyn Glen (North East Scotland) (Lab): The paper is very useful. It is helpful to bring together all that has happened.

Paragraph 8 of the paper states that witnesses

"recommended that the Scottish Government could seek to change attitudes of parents and young people through social marketing".

That would be a good aim for us and we could make a difference.

Witnesses referred to a respect agenda being rolled out in schools, which would also be important. Before we ask the Government to do that, we have to commission research and debate the issue further, but that would be the long-term aim.

The Convener: Research would be necessary to establish whether there is an issue in the first place, and to provide empirical evidence.

Hugh O'Donnell: I am sure that SPICe will be able to clarify this, but if we agree that the committee is going to commission research, we will have to be clear that the research must meet the ethical standards that we expect of, for example, a research project in a university, so that we do not fall foul of problems related to talking to young children and interviewing techniques. We must also consider whether we want qualitative or quantitative research. There are a variety of issues around conducting research, but I am particularly concerned that we remain aware that there are ethical standards that we must set in relation to how such research is conducted.

Malcolm Chisholm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab): I am at a slight disadvantage as I was not at the round-table discussion, but I have given the issue quite a lot of thought.

My instinct—for two reasons—is not to take the issue forward. First, I feel that any action on the matter is outwith the powers of Parliament. I am not saying that that is in itself a reason not to take the matter forward, but it is a consideration. We may come up with many recommendations in respect of consumer affairs with regard to the availability of such goods, but we would not be in a position to do anything. That is not a defining argument but, given the range of other issues that we are dealing with on which the Parliament and the Scottish Government have direct roles, I am a bit hesitant about undertaking work on the issue.

Secondly, the issue is complex and gives rise to concern in respect of the way in which sexualised goods may feed into gender stereotyping and violence against women. We should concentrate on those issues, which are, rather than sexualised goods per se, the problem.

We should be promoting the respect agenda: the issue feeds into that, but it is a tributary rather than the main agenda. We could obviously go ahead with work on the issue, but we would need to be careful as there are a lot of nuances.

We must be a wee bit careful, because children are sexualised beings from a very early age—many people would argue that they are sexualised from birth. Pop music is a good example of the many sexualised goods that we all accept are part of life. Children are highly exposed to pop music, which is all about sex. It is a complex subject, on which it would be interesting to do work, but we should concentrate on the mainstream equality issues, such as gender, for which Parliament has direct responsibility. It would be fine to do research on sexualised goods but, realistically, it would not lead to action that Parliament or the Scottish Government could take.

The Convener: The round-table discussion broadened out our consideration of the issue in a way that I had not expected, even though I had studied the papers extremely thoroughly. The points that witnesses made took us in all sorts of different directions. Reference was made to how the Australian Parliament approaches the issue: there, it is viewed as a community issue rather than one for the Government to take the lead on.

After we have heard from Sandra White and Johann Lamont, Camilla Kidner will comment on the devolved/reserved aspect. Malcolm Chisholm is quite right—there are two distinct aspects. On the devolved side, given that it is a community issue, we are considering awareness raising and early intervention on anything that could be

harmful from a gender perspective, as well as recommendations on education.

Sandra White: Malcolm Chisholm made a good argument for going ahead with research and investigating the issue. He is right that the subject of sexualised goods feeds into stereotyping and sexual violence and that it affects how people view women and gender. Regardless of whether the relevant powers are reserved or devolved, we are talking about an issue that affects the society that we live in. Given that we are products of that society, it is incumbent on the Equal Opportunities Committee to consider ways of improving it. I believe that research on sexualised goods in terms of how people are perceived and treated would help to do that.

Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab): The part of the round-table discussion that I attended was extremely interesting. Even if the committee does nothing else, that discussion helped to inform people and served as a rebuke to those who might want to dismiss the importance of such matters.

I understand that there is pressure on time and the committee's priorities. It must act on issues on which it can bring the greatest benefit. There is general consensus that research would be useful, but why is it necessary for the committee to commission it? Has there been discussion with ministers or with the Scottish Government about whether they have considered sexualised goods and what they are doing about them? Has the national group on violence against women considered the issue? Should the equality unit be responding to it, in the light of the issues that the round-table discussion brought into the public domain? We should not close the door on any course of action, but there should be discussion with the Scottish Government about its responsibilities as regards education and the respect agenda, and we need to know whether it has even considered sexualised goods. After we have received a response, we could decide whether the committee should commission research. Research is needed, but rather than undertake it ourselves, we should first push the Government to consider how the issue feeds into its broader agenda on violence against women.

The Convener: Johann Lamont has raised a number of issues. We want to know whether sexualised goods are a subject that the Government has already looked into. Before we held the round-table discussion, we considered the topic and produced a paper in order to identify whether the demand existed for such an event. We went ahead with it and were all highly impressed with what came out of it, which alerted us to the fact that sexualised goods seem to be an issue.

Camilla Kidner might be able to fill us in on the background. Among the questions that have been raised are the age of children from whom we could take evidence, whether the Government has taken a lead on the issue, whether such work has been done elsewhere and why the Equal Opportunities Committee should do it.

10:15

Camilla Kidner (Scottish Parliament Directorate of Access and Information): On Sandra White's point about the age of children from whom we could seek views, the paper suggests that we could speak to teenagers rather than to younger children, which we recognise raises difficult issues. That was Tom Narducci's point. Some of the other participants in the round-table discussion thought that it would be possible to take views from teenagers, as the paper says. If the committee decided to commission research, potential bidders could be asked to suggest how they would do such work in a properly ethical way, which brings me on to Hugh O'Donnell's point about the ethical basis of such research. Through the research specification and our evaluation of tenders, we would expect bidders to prove that they would do the research properly.

For such research, we would almost certainly use qualitative methods, given the complexities and the fact that we would need to tease out many different issues, which would be quite difficult to do through quantitative research. Qualitative research would definitely be the way to go.

Margaret Mitchell asked about the recommendations on devolved and reserved issues. The paper suggests that an event could be held to take forward any findings from research and to formulate recommendations. It would be a broader event involving a large number of participants, and would produce a mixture of recommendations, some of which Parliament would not be competent to act on. Once people had put forward their ideas in that broader forum, the committee could decide where best to take those ideas. Sexualised goods is an issue on which the majority of the legal powers are reserved, because it relates to consumer law. However, the issue goes wider than what could be legislated on.

The Convener: The main devolved areas of activity would be to do with raising awareness of public concern and education.

Camilla Kidner: Yes—but if we think of devolved areas as being those on which Parliament has legislative powers, sexualised goods might not be an area on which the committee would seek legislation.

The Convener: We appreciate that.

Camilla Kidner: That would broaden the agenda.

The Convener: You mentioned teenagers. Are you saying that we should seek the views of young people aged 13?

Camilla Kidner: Yes—they should probably be 12 or 13 and upwards.

The Convener: When you referred to teenagers, were you talking specifically about 13-year-olds?

Camilla Kidner: I did not mean children of that specific age; I just meant that they should not be young children—in other words, children who are younger than 10 or 11. I do not have a particular age in mind. It can be difficult to specify an age.

The Convener: On Johann Lamont's question, are you aware of any work that the Government is doing in this area?

Camilla Kidner: I am not aware that the Government is doing any such work, although I have not spoken to the equality unit about the proposal in question. I would certainly do that, if the committee was minded to ask me to do so.

Marlyn Glen: If the Scottish Government wanted to take up the task of doing the research, that would be fine and would mean that it was on board, but I thought that the research findings would pull the Government on board, rather than vice versa. What would the timescale be? I presume that we would have time to find out whether anyone else was doing such work—although my understanding from the round-table discussion is that no such research is being done in the United Kingdom.

The Convener: I think some work has been done abroad.

Camilla Kidner: Some work has been done, but it has tended to be about children's access to adult material, particularly on the internet, which has been examined in a lot more depth. Consumerism and children is a separate issue, but it is about consumerism in general rather than just sexualised consumerism. Work has been and is being done on those areas, but I have not come across any work in the UK on the sexualisation of products that are aimed at children.

The Convener: Work on such targeting would be new and ground breaking.

Marlyn Glen: And the timescale?

Camilla Kidner: If the committee decided today that it wanted to go ahead, I would need to work up a proposal paper that went into the research in a bit more detail. That would need to be approved by the committee, either at a meeting or by correspondence, and by the Conveners Group.

We would then start the tendering process, which would take about four to six weeks to give people a month or so to reply and to work up their bids. We would probably be in a position to issue a contract in March. From the scale of what is suggested in the paper it looks like a six-month project, which would report in the autumn. That is a rough timescale—it would depend on the bids and could change.

The Convener: If we commissioned research, it would be done externally and we would wait for the report to come out in the autumn. It would not involve any work for the committee in the interim period, and we would just consider the report when it came back.

Camilla Kidner: That is correct.

Hugh O'Donnell: I have two questions. The first relates to the extent to which there is public concern about the issue. That should be established. My constituency mailbag has not been jammed with letters expressing such concern so, as part of the research, we need to find out the extent to which the committee is hyping up the problem. My second question is a bit more mundane but is equally important. How much are we talking about spending?

Camilla Kidner: On the extent of public concern, one of the suggestions for the research is to hold focus groups with parents—it is important to get their views, for example on whether sexual imagery in goods aimed at children is a concern for them. When I prepared the previous paper for SPICE, a lot of the information was based on media reports, blogs and so on, but what came up at the round-table discussion was that a lot of that is anecdotal. If some focus groups are commissioned, they might be able to tease out more detail about the nature of parents' concerns.

The Convener: In addition to parents, would youth groups be contacted? Following the round-table discussion, I received an e-mail from the YMCA, which had done research in Paisley and Perth on academic achievement among males and females. It found that, to begin with, females tend to be ahead of the game but fall back a bit when they become more concerned about their image, and the discussion had begun to focus on why image should affect females' confidence in their ability to perform. There is a lot of good evidence that the committee can pass on to you. It was encouraging to find that another group was on the same wavelength as the round-table discussion in so far as it was able to come up with concrete examples of how the issue is playing out.

Camilla Kidner: One way to talk to teenagers might be to go through youth groups. However, if you mean talking to a representative body, I do not know whether we would need to do a focus group

with children's organisations and youth groups or whether they could come to the committee and give evidence. If, after the research is complete, the committee decided that it wanted to have an event, you could perhaps involve non-governmental organisations, youth groups and so on at that point.

Hugh O'Donnell: And the issue of cost?

Camilla Kidner: The annual budget for external research for all committees is about £160,000—that gives you an idea of the scale of the projects that the committees commission. I am hesitant about discussing the cost because we do not give a guide price in our commissioning process. As this is a public session, if I were to suggest to the committee what the cost might be, it would be like giving a guide price. I cannot really do that in public.

Hugh O'Donnell: Send it to me later in a sealed envelope.

Camilla Kidner: An estimated cost would be in the paper that went to the Conveners Group.

Bill Wilson (West of Scotland) (SNP): Another research project that we discussed was knocked back on the ground of cost, so I would like to see the cost of this research project before we put it to the Conveners Group. I appreciate Camilla Kidner's problem—I am not criticising her—but cost was a significant factor in the rejection of a previous project.

The Convener: It would be more accurate to say that, although cost may have been a factor in the discussion in private session on the item to which you refer, there were other reasons why the committee decided on another course of action.

Bill Wilson: As I recall, the major reason given was cost, so we should know the cost of this project before we put it before the Conveners Group.

The Convener: That is fine but, to set the record straight, I should say that there were other reasons why we decided on another course of action for that item.

Although the external research would consider the current extent of sexualised goods, it would not preclude us from looking at advertising and marketing trends. Obviously, we cannot go back and find out what was being sold in shops at a particular time, so will you provide more detail on how such an examination of advertising and marketing trends might work?

Camilla Kidner: During the round-table discussion, there was a debate about whether there had been an increase in the prevalence of sexual imagery in goods aimed at children, which raises the issue of how you might get a baseline.

One element of the research could be to consider what information was available about a previous time—you would have to choose a particular year, say 10 or 20 years ago. However, that would not be straightforward because you would need to consider the general change in culture and the huge changes in the media over the past 10 or 20 years, and to disentangle those issues from what you found in your research into products and advertising now and then. That element would add a considerable amount of work to the overall research project, and the committee would need to think carefully about whether to include it in the research baseline.

There is also the issue of what information would be available. You might be able to find particular instances of adverts but assessing their prevalence would be difficult. You could say, "Here's one advert that has these connotations" but, because so much information has been lost—depending on how far back you wanted to go—you could not say whether such an advert was typical.

The Convener: Could such research realistically go back as far as 20 years?

Camilla Kidner: I do not know. I am not an expert on researching advertising history, and I am not sure what archives and databases exist for such research. The bigger issue is how you would disentangle general changes in culture over the time period you were talking about.

The Convener: We have three options in front of us. If we went down the research route, would you come back to us with a paper for approval?

Camilla Kidner: Yes. I would do a proposal paper on the research project, which would need to be approved by the committee.

The Convener: Given the caveats and opinions that we have heard, are members content to ask Camilla Kidner to come back with that paper and for us to take our final decision then?

Members indicated agreement.

Hugh O'Donnell: Given the point that Bill Wilson and I raised, could we have that discussion in private? We would then have access to the potential cost of the project. I am not asking for a definite answer now.

The Convener: The discussion on costs could be separate. We can consider whether any further discussion on that is needed.

Malcolm Chisholm: As I said, I do not really support the project. However, if it goes ahead, it should be built into the remit that it is being done from an equalities perspective. I am concerned about how we disentangle people's attitudes to equalities from people's attitudes to sex. We are

not trying to go back to Victorian attitudes to sex, and we must not base the research on the idea that we cannot have any sexual discussions. Pop music is a good example. Some might say, "We don't think children should be exposed to pop songs because they're ultimately all about sex," which would be absurd. The focus should be on equalities rather than the absurd idea that children and sex should be kept apart.

10:30

The Convener: That point is well made. The point is also emphasised in paragraph 9 of the paper, which states:

"The gender issues which might be implied in sexualised goods make this an equal opportunities issue."

We hope that the research will tease out those gender issues and provide empirical evidence. I hear what Malcolm Chisholm is saying about the big issues of abuse and so on, but the research will try to tease out how and how early such attitudes are formed.

Marlyn Glen: The point that was made in the round-table discussion is that we need to tackle the inappropriate sexualisation of goods for children, which is quite a different issue. We are definitely not being Victorian in our attitudes.

The Convener: Accepting that the cost factor will be discussed in private, are we content to ask Camilla Kidner to work up a paper on commissioning research, which we can then discuss before giving the final go-ahead?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: Are we content to leave the other two options until we see that paper and move on from there?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: As agreed at a previous meeting, we will consider our next item, which is draft guidance on how committees can mainstream equal opportunities in their work, in private. We will wait for the public gallery to clear.

10:31

Meeting continued in private until 11:17.

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