

EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE

Tuesday 24 March 2009

Session 3

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CONTENTS

Tuesday 24 March 2009

Col.

DEPUTY CONVENER	905
RACE EQUALITY STATEMENT	906

EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE

5th Meeting 2009, Session 3

CONVENER

*Margaret Mitchell (Central Scotland) (Con)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Marlyn Glen (North East Scotland) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

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

*Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Loudon) (SNP)

*Bill Kidd (Glasgow) (SNP)

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

Elaine Smith (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)

*Bill Wilson (West of Scotland) (SNP)

COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTES

Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

Margaret Smith (Edinburgh West) (LD)

Shirley-Anne Somerville (Lothians) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING GAVE EVIDENCE:

Lesley Irving (Scottish Government Equalities, Social Inclusion and Sport Directorate)

Alex Neil (Minister for Housing and Communities)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Terry Shevlin

ASSISTANT CLERK

Rebecca Lamb

LOCATION

Committee Room 1

Scottish Parliament

Equal Opportunities Committee

Tuesday 24 March 2009

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 10:33*]

Deputy Convener

The Convener (Margaret Mitchell): Good morning, everyone, and welcome to the fifth meeting of the Equal Opportunities Committee in 2009. I remind all those present, including members, that mobile phones and BlackBerrys should be switched off completely, as they interfere with the sound system even when they are switched to silent.

We have apologies from Elaine Smith and from Johann Lamont, who would otherwise have attended the committee as her substitute.

Item 1 is the choice of deputy convener following Elaine Smith's resignation from the post. I pay tribute to Elaine Smith for all her work as my deputy during the past couple of years and I know that members will join me in wishing her a speedy recovery. She has confirmed that she will continue to be a member of the committee and we hope that she will be back at the committee in the very near future.

By agreeing to motion S3M-137, the Parliament agreed that the deputy convener of the Equal Opportunities Committee shall be a member of the Labour Party. I invite nominations for the post.

Malcolm Chisholm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab): I nominate Marlyn Glen.

Marlyn Glen was chosen as deputy convener.

The Convener: I congratulate Marlyn Glen on becoming the new deputy convener of the Equal Opportunities Committee.

Race Equality Statement

10:34

The Convener: Item 2 is evidence on the Scottish Government's race equality statement. The committee took evidence on the statement from a range of witnesses at its previous meeting. It is my pleasure to welcome Alex Neil, the Minister for Housing and Communities, who is appearing before the committee for the first time since his recent appointment. I also welcome the Scottish Government officials who are accompanying the minister: Lesley Irving, team leader in the equality unit; and Kelly Abel, policy officer with the equality unit.

I invite the minister to make an opening statement.

The Minister for Housing and Communities (Alex Neil): Thank you, convener. I, too, express my best wishes to Elaine Smith and hope that she has a speedy recovery. She has a tremendous reputation within the Parliament and outside it for her commitment to equal opportunities, and I am sure that Marlyn Glen is a worthy successor.

The committee has asked the Government to address a number of issues. I will try to cover those in summary form in my introductory remarks, which will, I estimate from my rate of speaking, take about six minutes. I hope that I manage to cover the main points and we can go into further detail in questions.

One of the committee's first questions asked why the Government has produced a statement and not a strategy. As members are aware, we have a new working relationship with local authorities, which has changed the way in which we work. We decided in the light of the historic concordat that a strategy that contained detailed recommendations for local areas was no longer the most appropriate way forward, as we want local areas to work towards addressing local issues themselves.

The race equality statement instead sets out a strategic framework for our work to progress race equality. It demonstrates our leadership, which is important to all the people whom we are consulting, and it will, I hope, provide a clear steer on our priorities. The statement reflects the underlying principles that we would all like to be followed in relation to race equality.

The committee also asked for an explanation for the delay in publication. That delay was influenced by three fundamental factors. First, the previous Administration—I am not blaming it, as it probably made the right decision—halted the publication of what was then the strategy because it felt that the

issue should not be addressed until after the election in May 2007. Secondly, we inherited a piece of work that, although it was immensely valuable, was in some respects out of date by the time it came to us. Thirdly, as I have just said, the historic concordat meant that the strategy no longer fitted the context in which we were working with our friends in local authorities and in the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities.

The third issue on which the committee asked me to comment was the definition of "ethnic minority". We have not defined the term in the statement, but I make it clear that we include Gypsies/Travellers and non-visible minorities when we use that term. That includes Irish, English, Welsh, Polish and other immigrant communities from the accession 8 countries and Bulgaria and Romania.

We also make it clear that we are referring to diverse communities that have diverse needs—they are not a homogeneous group. The statement makes clear that we want to continue to explore the complexities of people's multiple identities and the links with other equalities strands, as many ethnic minority individuals will also be affected by gender, age, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender and disability issues.

The statement refers to faith issues as far as they interact with race issues—for example, in relation to Islamophobia. It is not meant to represent all the work that the Scottish Government is doing to tackle racial and faith discrimination, but it indicates the direction of travel.

Although there has been a delay in publishing the statement, we have not been standing still. Many of the actions that were identified by the four strategic groups have already been implemented. In the past two years, for example, we have provided more than £5.6 million to 33 voluntary organisations that are working on projects, particularly in rural areas, to improve race equality and tackle discrimination on the ground. We have introduced legislation to ensure that further and higher education becomes more accessible to asylum seekers. We have also provided £81,375 for the creation of a new transit site for Gypsies/Travellers in South Ayrshire and have allocated £125,000 over the period from 2009 to 2011 for the development of an e-learning strategy for young Gypsies/Travellers. Finally, we are already commissioning work from voluntary organisations to deliver on specific actions in the statement.

As far as publicising the statement is concerned, my predecessor, the Minister for Communities and Sport, announced its publication on 8 December, and it was published on the Government's website. Stakeholders were also e-mailed the

statement on 8 December and we are working with COSLA on the best way of raising awareness of it among local authorities.

The statement sets out the areas that we want to prioritise for action, including work on improving the lives of Gypsies/Travellers; work on employment, particularly for minority ethnic women; work in rural areas; and work with migrant workers and Muslim communities. I reiterate that we consider issues affecting Gypsies/Travellers to be a priority. I know that much still has to be done on the issue and we will work to drive forward change to improve the lives of these communities, which we value as an integral part of Scottish society. In fact, I want to announce that we have just allocated £125,500 over the next two years to Article 12 in Scotland to work with young Gypsies/Travellers in developing their skills, opening up opportunities and improving outcomes for the group.

I believe that the statement is flexible and broad enough to meet Scotland's changing race equality needs. It is not set in stone; indeed, given the ever evolving nature of race equality, it is important that it is not set in stone.

I hope that those remarks have been helpful. I am happy to take the committee's questions.

The Convener: Thank you for that very comprehensive opening statement, which has addressed many of the common themes that emerged in our round-table discussion two weeks ago.

I want to consider the statement in a bit more detail. Given the evolving nature of race-related terminology, with references in the statement and in the round-table discussion to "multiculturalism", "pluralism", "inclusive national identity", "interculturalism", "assimilation" and "integration", given the media coverage of race and faith issues, and given the diverse nature of Scottish society, what are the challenges for the Scottish Government in seeking to foster

"a sense of common purpose and goals"

in a multicultural society?

Alex Neil: As far as integration and assimilation are concerned, it is very important that we talk about integration into our community. Of course, that does not mean that we are seeking in any way to subdue the identity of any ethnic minority group. We want people to be able to be faithful to their community's traditions while, at the same time, feeling 100 per cent part of Scotland's wider community. Achieving that objective in our day-to-day lives is probably the biggest challenge of the lot.

You also referred to faith in your question. Although faith touches on and is interlinked with

race equality, they are two separate issues. This statement deals very much with race equality rather than faith, although I should point out that, in recognition of the part that they play in the bigger picture, we are funding schemes through the Scottish Inter Faith Council to improve interfaith relationships.

We face specific challenges in specific areas. For example, you will be aware that, in parts of Glasgow, there is a very large Gypsy/Traveller-type community. From my discussions with Govanhill Housing Association and other organisations, I know that such a concentration gives rise to particular challenges for that community. However, we have to face up to those challenges—and we are doing so.

10:45

The Convener: How would you face up to the challenges in the example that you have just given?

Alex Neil: Although a range of issues has to be considered, there are particular challenges in education and housing. If we leave ethnicity to one side, the fact is that, irrespective of its profile, an influx of people into a particular area puts pressure on local health, education and housing services. With regard to housing, which is part of my responsibilities, we recognise the challenges that Govanhill Housing Association and Glasgow City Council face in ensuring that there is enough good-quality housing to meet the influx of people into that part of the city. Both in the affordable housing investment allocations that we announced last week and in the internal allocation of that money, for which Glasgow City Council is responsible, we and the council want to reflect the housing challenges that are faced by that community.

Similarly, my colleague Fiona Hyslop is working with education authorities to ensure that we face up to education challenges and my colleague the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing is doing the same with regard to the health service. We have to ensure that resources are as far as possible available at community level to meet the challenge of, in this case, a fairly significant influx of people into a community in Glasgow.

The Convener: Does meeting that challenge involve more consultation and discussion with residents to smooth over any difficulties?

Alex Neil: Absolutely. In fact, yesterday in Barrhead, I had the pleasure of launching with Councillor Harry McGuigan from COSLA the community empowerment action plan. I have to say that there was a great deal of interest in the launch, at which the ethnic minority communities were represented.

The action plan makes very clear the importance of empowering ethnic minority communities in the same way as everyone else in our community. It is not just about discussion and consultation; we need to go a step further and focus on community empowerment to ensure that the people in communities have powers to direct their lives. Indeed, the housing association movement is a very good example of such empowerment.

The Convener: I think that examples always help to illustrate how specific challenges are being met.

You said in response to the first question that your goal was integration. If, in a multicultural society, the law applies to everyone but people are free to observe their own cultural practices, will there be an increasing need for the Government to intervene if what it perceives to be a conflict of view over race or faith emerges in, for example, schooling or attitudes to women?

Alex Neil: As you will be aware, the United Kingdom is primarily responsible for introducing, implementing and monitoring race equality legislation. The Scottish Government can intervene only in devolved areas, but we work very closely with the UK Government's main agency for implementing such legislation, the Equality and Human Rights Commission, to address any general or specific issues that arise.

That said, I will make two points. First, irrespective of who they are, anyone who lives in this country must respect and abide by the law of the land. That is well accepted by the leadership of every ethnic minority community in Scotland.

Secondly, ethnic minority communities must be free to express their own views, concerns and political preferences. We live in a democratic society and they have the same democratic rights as everyone else. Therefore, if they perceive the need for a change in the law, they are entitled to put the case for a change in the law, no matter what change they are advocating. Not just as the Scottish Government but as human beings, if there were difficulties with community relationships, we would, along with the local authorities and the other relevant bodies, intervene if required to ensure that any problems were properly addressed.

The Convener: I specifically mentioned education, which is a devolved matter, and attitudes to women that may be contrary to those that are promoted by our laws. Those are issues for which the Parliament has responsibility. Do you have anything to add on those matters?

Alex Neil: The Scottish Government's position is very clear on forced marriages and issues of that sort. I do not think that we differ from our predecessors in our policies on those issues. We

are working closely with the Westminster Government on the issue of women with no access to the public purse. We think that there are not a great number of such women in Scotland—we estimate that there are fewer than 50. Nevertheless, not having access to the public purse is a major problem for those 50 women. We are working closely with our colleagues south of the border to address that issue, as the primary policy responsibility for it rests with the UK Government—in particular, with the Home Office.

The Convener: The specific question that I had in mind in relation to education was faith schools, in which there might be teaching that could be seen not to fit in with British society.

Alex Neil: We talk to the leadership of the Muslim community and other ethnic minorities in Scotland and, as you know, there has been discussion of the possibility of having a dedicated school in Glasgow. The First Minister has said that the Scottish Government would be supportive of that idea. To the best of my knowledge, no progress has been made on that proposal in recent times, but that is nevertheless an indication of our approach.

The Convener: A common theme in our round-table discussion was the need for monitoring and the lack of detail and specifics. The statement sets out the Scottish Government's aspirations. Can you give us a bit more detail about how those aspirations will be realised and the corresponding timescales?

Alex Neil: Let us consider the example of Gypsies/Travellers. As I said in my opening remarks, they are one of our priority areas for action. We are working with the Gypsy/Traveller community and leadership, local authorities and others. Progress has been made on the establishment of a transit site in South Ayrshire in close co-operation with the council. We are also making progress with a number of local authorities on the management of campsites. We are actively in discussions with 24 of the 32 local authorities about the management of campsites and, as I have mentioned, we have allocated £5 million over a four-year period to the specific issues relating to Gypsies/Travellers. Those are practical examples of how we are trying to address the issues.

With Gypsies/Travellers, there are specific issues to do with education because of the travelling nature of the community. There are also specific issues to do with housing, particularly in relation to sites, and health. If someone is travelling, that makes it much more difficult for them to establish a relationship with a general practitioner, for example. Legal aid is another issue, as Gypsies/Travellers sometimes find it difficult to access legal aid. We have, therefore, ensured that legal aid is available for them where

necessary, to ensure that they can pursue their rights. There are also issues relating to planning and unauthorised encampments. Those are all areas in which we are engaged in a series of activities. I will be happy to send you some detailed examples of that work and a list of all the projects in which we are involved in relation to Gypsies/Travellers. There is a wide range of such projects right across Scotland.

The Convener: That would be very helpful. The committee would welcome that, as that issue was quite a feature of the round-table discussion, as you will know.

What progress is the Scottish Government making towards the national outcome on race equality that

"We have tackled the significant inequalities in our society"?

Alex Neil: That is work in progress. Clearly, that is not an easy outcome to measure. We carry out survey work from time to time, but I do not think that any such work has been carried out recently. We will, however, plan some survey work to gauge attitudes. Some of the on-going survey work that is done by the UK Government and the Office for National Statistics informs us, from time to time, about some of the issues.

On the whole, we are making substantial progress. One particular area that concerns me is the anti-English activity that is sometimes carried out by a small minority of people. The evidence that we have received, which backs up my own observation, is that the number of incidents involving anti-English behaviour has, if anything, declined. That is welcome. Nevertheless, because there are so many different indicators of progress, we would be happy to send you the most up-to-date information that we have across the board.

The Convener: Again, that would be very welcome.

Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Good morning. At the round-table discussion, which was my first session with the committee, I picked up a sense of frustration among some of the communities at the speed at which progress is being made. The answers that you have given are much appreciated and have addressed a number of the issues that came up. However, some of the representatives felt that we need action now and some kind of mechanism to address specific issues without having to wait for the statement or the strategies that may follow it at a later stage.

The Government's race equality statement says that there will be a conference this year and a progress report in 2010, which will be followed by the assessment of various targets in 2011.

However, the communities are asking for a mechanism now to deal with specific issues that they face. You referred to the provision of legal aid to Gypsy Travellers. When that issue was discussed at the round-table session, the experience around the table was that Gypsy Travellers are refused legal representation. The representatives felt very frustrated about that. Can we do anything to short-cut or fast-track such issues as they arise in a much more effective way?

Alex Neil: I have made it clear that I am determined to ensure that, when a Government policy is not properly implemented, we will intervene to ensure that it is properly implemented. To some extent, I share the frustration that you describe. Progress never seems to be being made fast enough in such areas, and the system depends on the way in which people apply the rules and regulations—in this case, in relation to legal aid.

I have two points to make in relation to that. First, when examples such as the one that you have given arise, ministers are prepared to intervene, if necessary, with the Scottish Legal Aid Board, the Law Society of Scotland, the Faculty of Advocates or whoever to ensure that our intentions—and Parliament's intentions—are being adhered to in both the letter and the spirit of the policy. When such examples are flagged up to us, we will take action quickly.

11:00

Secondly, I want to address the need to have a more systematic conduit for more regular feedback from and discussion with the ethnic minority community. Of course, one issue is the diverse number of ethnic minority communities. As I said in my opening statement, we are dealing not with a homogeneous group of people but with a host of different groups that are homogeneous in themselves, but not across the board.

As the new minister, I want to tackle the systems that are in place to ensure continuing dialogue. For example, I have established that we will have regular meetings on housing with COSLA, the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations and all the other key umbrella players. I want to ensure that we have the same regular dialogue on race equality, so that we can deal quickly with problems that arise.

Willie Coffey: That is encouraging. Participants in the round-table discussion wanted a forum at which they could not only present problems as they arose but share the experience of whether issues were being resolved quickly enough for communities. What you say is welcome.

Alex Neil: If the committee would like to make suggestions or recommendations in that respect, we will take them seriously.

Hugh O'Donnell (Central Scotland) (LD): The minister said—I am paraphrasing—that policy positions on the subject are the same as those at Westminster. I am interested to know whether that means that the Scottish Government intends to introduce legislation on forced marriages, as Westminster has.

Alex Neil: My colleague Kenny MacAskill takes the lead on the discussions that are taking place on legislative proposals. We can furnish the committee with the up-to-date position on the discussions between Westminster and Holyrood.

Marlyn Glen (North East Scotland) (Lab): My questions are about the section of the statement on the evidence base. You have said that you will furnish us with updated information, which might help not just the committee but the witnesses who participated in the round-table session. Scrutinising policy and monitoring progress are difficult when hard facts are not available for comparison. To set the context, we might have expected the statement to contain more examples of race inequality, such as statistics on instances of overt racism like racially motivated offences. Why were such examples left out?

Alex Neil: We gave examples but did not cover every statistic. We are glad to furnish the committee with any statistic that is not available in the statement or in subsequent publications. In any update on the statement, we will take into account the committee's recommendations on additional information that needs to be included. I was not the minister when the statement was produced, so I might not know the precise reason why any particular statistic was not included. If the committee makes clear the statistics that it believes should be included in the race equality statement or other statements, I will do everything that I can to accommodate its wishes.

Marlyn Glen: That would help, because that would enable us to measure whether progress was being made.

Alex Neil: Yes—absolutely.

Marlyn Glen: In your introduction, you mentioned the employment of minority ethnic women. The statement shows that, in educational attainment, females from minority ethnic groups perform better than females from white ethnic groups. Will you expand on your plans to use that information?

Alex Neil: I make a distinction between educational attainment and employment. To be frank, we need to ensure that the employment opportunities for ethnic minority women are

properly followed through. The last research that I saw showed that although ethnic minority women do exceptionally well in educational attainment, that is not reflected as well as it should be in employment opportunities. We want to pursue that. It is obvious that, in a recession, employment opportunities for everybody are a difficult policy matter. However, the situation is not right. Given the clear evidence of how well ethnic minority women perform in educational attainment, to achieve equality we need to reflect that in employment opportunities, not just in terms of getting employment but in terms of the quality of employment that those women obtain. I want to pursue that policy issue.

Marlyn Glen: I am interested in the details of that work and in being updated on how you pursue it. The aspiration is good, but how will it be delivered?

Alex Neil: We are tackling the fact that many statistics are not held or collected centrally, which means that it is sometimes more difficult to inform policy, particularly evidence-based policy. It is clear that, in progressing such issues, we want to ensure that any policy decisions are evidence based. We are considering where we are short of the evidence that we need to decide how best to tackle problems. To be honest, it is difficult to assemble information on the subject systematically, but we want to address that.

Marlyn Glen: You are trying to improve data on ethnic minorities; I understand the problems. Are racial differences always likely to be the result of racism or discrimination? Do broad comparisons between white ethnic groups and minority ethnic groups risk masking significant differences within and between minority ethnic groups?

Alex Neil: I will finish off my point about data. We have suggested changes to the 2011 census questions to capture some information about, for example, Gypsies/Travellers. The census is the responsibility not of us, but of the Office for National Statistics.

Lesley Irving (Scottish Government Equalities, Social Inclusion and Sport Directorate): The Office for National Statistics is responsible for the census in England and Wales, but the General Register Office for Scotland is responsible for the census in Scotland. We have worked closely with GROS colleagues to develop a new and modernised ethnicity classification for Scotland, elements of which will differ from that which the ONS will use in its census.

Alex Neil: I thank Lesley Irving for correcting me with the name of the agency in Scotland.

We are talking to our colleagues south of the border, because one benchmark for measuring progress in Scotland is how progress is measured

south of the border. It is clear that a relationship exists between what happens north of the border and what happens south of the border. We are suggesting census changes to the agency that Lesley Irving correctly named, to capture more information in the census.

Marlyn Glen asked about racism. From my experience and from my constituency work in 10 years as a member of the Scottish Parliament, I have no doubt that racial tensions and difficulties are sometimes as much between or within ethnic minority groups as they are between ethnic minority groups and typical Scottish white people. My view is simple: any racism of any type is totally unacceptable, whether it is racism within an ethnic minority community or racism between an ethnic minority community and the wider community. Racism is wrong—full stop.

Bill Kidd (Glasgow) (SNP): Do Scottish Government departments monitor the percentages of all their employees and of their women employees who are from ethnic minority backgrounds? Departments could influence and set a considerable example for broader Scottish society. I do not know whether there are figures for the number of such employees in the Scottish Government. If there are, are there plans to increase the percentage, if it is not reasonable?

Alex Neil: We have targets for women and ethnic minorities. We will double check the figures, but I think that our target for ethnic minorities is in the order of 2.5 per cent.

Lesley Irving: That is the target going forward; the current target is 1.7 per cent.

Alex Neil: We are probably about 60 per cent of the way towards reaching the eventual target. We are considering how we can improve the situation, because it is clear that significant improvement is needed.

Bill Kidd: PATH Scotland has been successful in bringing ethnic minority people—in particular young people—into training and employment with housing associations. It is not the only organisation that is doing such work. Those organisations might be able to help to bring more people from ethnic minorities into the Scottish Government. Would the Government be interested in using such organisations instead of reinventing the wheel?

Alex Neil: We absolutely would. Every source of help in achieving the target is welcome. You are right to say that there has been great success in getting ethnic minority young people involved in housing associations—of course, those figures do not count as Government figures.

My officials have passed me some information. We are giving PATH Scotland £125,000 over a

three-year period. It is worth putting it on the record that the project is a follow-up to a management leadership programme for black and minority ethnic communities, which was funded under the race equality, integration and community support fund. Your suggestion that PATH Scotland might be able to help central Government departments or Government agencies and quangos is a good one, which we will pursue.

Malcolm Chisholm: Employment is important. In your statement you flagged up a measure that was proposed by the strategic group on ethnic minorities in the labour market. You might have covered this in your introductory remarks, but what has happened to the rest of the group's recommendations? Are they still on the table?

Alex Neil: We hope to take them all forward. They are certainly not being frozen and they have not been rejected; we are working on them all, but they all require more work.

Malcolm Chisholm: That is helpful.

In your opening remarks you gave a helpful explanation of your approach to performance at local level. You said that a strategy that contains detailed recommendations for local areas is no longer appropriate. However, I am sure that you remain interested in and concerned about what is happening locally. I refer to two critiques of what is happening. First, Audit Scotland, in its recent report "The impact of the race equality duty on council services", concluded:

"Councils have developed policies on race equality, but the duty has not yet had a significant impact on the delivery of services or on people from minority ethnic communities."

Secondly, during the committee's evidence taking meeting two weeks ago, Rami Ousta, from Black and Ethnic Minority Infrastructure in Scotland, expressed concern about delivery at local level more than once. He said:

"If we have an issue with any community planning partnership, the council is not interested. The Government is the same—it says that the relevant powers are at local authority level. There is a gap there, where race equality work and culture are being diminished."—[*Official Report, Equal Opportunities Committee*, 10 March 2009; c 872.]

Are you concerned about the performance of local authorities and community planning partnerships? If so, what action can the Scottish Government take in the new concordat climate?

11:15

Alex Neil: If individual authorities are not implementing the duty as well as they could and should be doing, we want to work with them to try to ensure that they do better.

It is not a straightforward case of some authorities doing better than others; the Audit

Scotland report highlighted wide discrepancies between departments. For example, it is typical of planning departments to be much less advanced than library services are in implementing the duty. The problem is often not just at local authority level; there are wide variations in performance within individual authorities. As a general rule, it seems that in some disciplines, perhaps including planning, people from ethnic minority communities are not being employed to the extent that is the case in other services. In the local authorities that were studied, library services came out rather well. We will do intensive work with local authorities that were highlighted in the report, to ensure that much more substantial progress is made.

Audit Scotland recommended that the Scottish Government should

"ensure the availability of more up-to-date and useful social and demographic data on minority ethnic communities",

which is one way of ensuring that there is a benchmark against which we can measure what local authorities are doing. We are taking forward the recommendation.

That brings me back to a point that I made in response to Marlyn Glen. We need to close significant data gaps, which sometimes make it difficult to know how much progress we are making. I am concerned by what Audit Scotland said about some local authorities and departments within local authorities. We are taking the matter forward.

Malcolm Chisholm: Concern was also expressed about community planning partnerships. It is important that you have acknowledged your concern, because, given what you said, there might be concern that the absence of detailed action is an effect of the concordat climate. The Government's equality unit has shown great leadership, so you will understand that ethnic minority communities might be concerned that progress will slow down rather than speed up if more is left to local authorities and community planning partnerships.

Alex Neil: I mentioned that I regularly meet COSLA. I intend to put the issue on the agenda, to be discussed soon.

Malcolm Chisholm: In general, we are positive about the statement, but we must highlight concerns that were flagged up during our evidence-taking meeting—you probably read the *Official Report* of the meeting. The witness from BEMIS expressed concern about the absence of positive action measures and about the failure to address institutional racism. Will you comment on those two issues? Is action being taken on them that is not specifically mentioned in the statement?

Alex Neil: There are areas in which positive action is required to achieve the ambitious outcomes targets that we have set ourselves, but we need to be precise about where to target positive action, rather than take a blanket approach. I used to work in the States, where I employed a lot of people in a large corporation. We had to meet positive discrimination targets. Of course, that was way back in the 1980s and the legislation was subsequently changed, because the issue is not just the principle of positive action but how we do it—if it is not done properly, it can be counterproductive in the long run. It is important to ensure that positive action is taken to resolve a particular challenge rather than as a blanket approach.

In the past, allegations of institutional racism have been made. In such cases, action has to be taken to root it out; institutional racism is not acceptable. Whenever any substantiated allegation of institutional racism is made in the areas and organisations over which the Government has responsibility and influence, we will do our utmost to root the institutional racism out.

Malcolm Chisholm: I should stress that Rami Ousta supported positive action but not positive discrimination.

Alex Neil: Absolutely, but positive discrimination was part of a wider positive action agenda—in those days, in America.

The Convener: You have put that in context.

Hugh O'Donnell: Audit Scotland referred to the performance of local authorities, suggesting in a recent paper on the race equality duty that one outcome for people from minority ethnic communities should be that

“Council staff communicate respectfully, and are knowledgeable about their cultural background and concerns.”

Given the diversity among communities, how can that be possible in practice? On any day, people from all sorts of cultural backgrounds will come through councils' doors, but how can we expect council employees to deal with that?

Alex Neil: There are two levels. First, there is the initial contact with council officials. Council tax offices are a good example to consider, because many people have contact with them. In the initial contact, it is important that the person behind the counter acts appropriately and treats the person with respect, offering the same level of support and service that would be offered to anyone who was not a member of an ethnic minority community. Secondly, however, it frequently happens that a person from an ethnic minority community has particular requirements. For example, their knowledge and understanding of

English might mean that it is difficult for the council official to understand and communicate properly with them. That is where support services come in. If issues arise that the front-end official cannot deal with, the official must be able to access the appropriate quality of professional support for different ethnic minority groups.

As Hugh O'Donnell suggests, a large number of different ethnic minority groups exist, and some have very specialised requirements. We cannot expect every council official to provide all services to everybody—by which I mean everybody in the population, not just everybody in the ethnic minority groups. Officials need reliable support services. The Government is determined to ensure that, across Scotland, local authorities and other public bodies have resource to allow them to access a range of quality services. That is not to say that every local authority will offer the same range of services, although it might be that some services, such as translation services, are offered by a specialist organisation that covers the whole of Scotland. Council officials cannot be expected to cover absolutely everything, but they should know how to access support services to ensure that the person on the other side of the counter gets the service that they require.

Hugh O'Donnell: Earlier, the minister made points about planning. I plead for a similar approach to be taken to community health partnerships. Many issues arise relating to people's ethnic origin and expectations of services. Health boards have to be aware of that.

Alex Neil: My colleague Nicola Sturgeon, who is the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing, is very well aware of such issues and is addressing a number of them as part of her portfolio.

Bill Kidd: I will follow on from Hugh O'Donnell's question. The English language can be a knotty problem—spelled with a “k”. It is a complex language for people to learn. The UK Government has emphasised how important it is that migrants learn English, but it wants to use more of the stick than the carrot. It has produced guidance for local authorities that suggests that translation be provided only where it is necessary and can act as a stepping stone to speaking English. I am not absolutely certain how such guidance can be implemented. However, will the Scottish Government emphasise the same point? If so, what implications will that have for the race equality duty of Scottish public bodies?

Alex Neil: The Scottish Government is responsible for devolved services, so our approach is different from that of the UK Government. Our emphasis is very much on encouraging people and ensuring that they receive the level of language services that they require. The language could be used for a multitude of

purposes—for educational purposes, for the purpose of meeting the UK Government's requirement that people become articulate in English or for many other purposes, depending on people's objectives. Our emphasis is on providing services and support, so that people who want to learn English or who want to take a more advanced course in English can access the appropriate course.

Marlyn Glen: I have been interested for a long time in how the issue is approached in Quebec, where great emphasis is placed on migrants being able to speak both French and English, as well as their own language. The reason for that emphasis is not only so that people who come into the country can access services—although I agree that that is hugely important—but so that they can be more employable and can be economically active, which obviously is good for the individuals as well as good for the country. However, for that to happen here, a really good English teaching service would be required. What do you think of the Quebec approach?

Alex Neil: I agree with it, in general. Support services for teaching people English must be readily available. Bill Kidd questioned the UK Government's reason for wanting people to learn English, and Marlyn Glen's point is important. Often, people come to this country because they want to improve their economic wellbeing, and the ability to speak English will improve their chances of getting a good job.

When people come here to work in the health service, for example, they need English if they are to do their job effectively. If a doctor, dentist or nurse comes here, it clearly is important that they understand and can speak English. For example, doctors have to diagnose people who have life-threatening diseases. It is therefore important that professional, high-quality language services are readily available to people right across Scotland. I emphasise "right across Scotland". Many people have the misconception that the migrant communities gravitate towards cities such as Glasgow and Edinburgh. However, Inverness probably has as high a proportion of people from the Polish community as have some of the bigger cities. Services should therefore not be confined to the large cities; they have to be available nationwide.

Marlyn Glen: In places such as Inverness, there is also an impact on schools when children come in who do not speak English. Resources will be necessary, but where will they come from?

11:30

Alex Neil: Having chaired the then Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee, I happen to

know that the college sector in particular in Inverness has been conscious of the need to provide such services and has been funded to do so by the Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council. Such funding is primarily an issue for Fiona Hyslop's department rather than mine, but we all work to ensure that such services are available where necessary in health, housing, education and employment. My experience as convener of that committee was that, particularly for the adult population from the migrant community, Scotland's colleges did—and still do—a wonderful job in teaching English as well as other languages.

Let me say also that the issue is not just about getting the migrant community to learn English. We should be encouraging people to learn languages anyway. People who wish to do so should be encouraged to learn Urdu or whatever language they are interested in. The traffic should not be entirely one way.

The Convener: On that point, you mentioned that the council tax office might be people's first contact with a local authority. If people cannot speak English and have no need to do so for employment purposes, where does the balance lie between achieving your stated goal of integration and providing the required translation services, which obviously involve a cost to local authorities? Where does the balance lie and how is that monitored?

Alex Neil: People who come here and do not learn English should be encouraged to do so because that will make life much easier for them and, for very practical reasons, will improve their life chances and those of their family. However, we cannot go to the stage of telling those who refuse to learn English that they will be banned from receiving certain services or anything like that. Apart from anything else, that would probably be illegal and would certainly be immoral. Generally, most people are sensible about the issue. My friends from the migrant community have all been anxious not only to learn English but, in some cases, to take advanced English. Indeed, some of them have a much better understanding of the language and can articulate it much better than someone like me. In my experience, there are few cases in which people absolutely refuse to learn the English language. The vast majority want to learn English because it makes life easier for them.

The Convener: To encourage people to learn English, will the Scottish Government monitor the use of translation services in local government and other public bodies?

Alex Neil: Monitor is a very strong word. We are certainly aware of the services that are available. Where there are issues, we try to identify them

with our partners in local government. If they need our help to address them, we will provide that assistance.

The Convener: The need for statistics and hard facts to find out the extent of the problem was another theme that came through in our round-table discussion. I just wanted to pin you down a little bit more on how the encouragement that you mentioned would come.

Alex Neil: If the committee feels that further statistical collation is needed, we will certainly consider that. I am not sure—I would need to be convinced of this—that the problem is significant enough to invest large amounts in statistical collation. However, if the committee finds evidence otherwise, we will obviously listen to what the committee says.

Bill Wilson (West of Scotland) (SNP): The question concerns me slightly. I am a bit worried that people might conclude that anyone who speaks English does not need a translator. In my experience, as a rather poor Castilian speaker when travelling in South America, people frequently assume that I speak the language much better than I do and suppose that I have understood much more than I have. Often, I miss some slight subtleties. Even someone who speaks English quite well can still need a translator, particularly for dealing with any complexity that might arise with the council.

Alex Neil: Absolutely. Sometimes, if one comes across a difficult council officer who might not be as user friendly as they should be, one can understand why people feel that they are not getting the level of service to which they are entitled even though, in their view, they have articulated very well the need for that service.

The problems that you raise must be addressed by the local authority. Good local authorities monitor the situation regularly—for example, they conduct customer satisfaction surveys and the like. Any issues such as that which you identify need to be addressed by the local authority. We cannot do everything; we rely on others to engage in some self-discipline.

The Convener: You spoke quite a lot about Gypsy Travellers, on whom we have further questions.

Bill Wilson: I note from your reply to Patrick Harvie's parliamentary question S3O-6274 that the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing wrote to the UK Government on 26 June 2007 and that you still await a reply. What was that contact about? Did it include a request for consideration to be given to formal legal recognition of Gypsy Travellers and to their being given ethnic minority status? If you have still not received a reply, will you make further contact and encourage one?

Alex Neil: As far as the Scottish Government is concerned, Gypsies/Travellers are an ethnic minority and should be treated and recognised as such. That is our view; I think that my predecessor made that absolutely clear, too. So far, we have not had a substantive response of any significance from the UK Government. As the new minister, I want to take up the matter with it again and see whether we can make some progress.

Bill Wilson: I am delighted to hear that. You said that some progress has been made in South Ayrshire where the situation is under active discussion, and you mentioned discussions with 24 local authorities. It is clear that there has been some progress on the provision of Gypsy Traveller sites. The previous Equal Opportunities Committee supported the call for a national review of the current and future accommodation needs of Gypsy Travellers. Has such a review been carried out?

Alex Neil: We have not done a national review, but if we do not make enough progress, we will look at the situation. At present, we prefer to conduct reviews locally because we can address the issues primarily by working through the local authorities. If we feel that there is a need for a national review, we will keep an open mind on the situation. At the moment, we are trying the local method of working through the issue and, to be fair, we are making progress in several areas.

I quoted the example of the South Ayrshire transit site, but 24 local authorities are involved in managing sites and we are looking at site availability. As you know, regulation has changed, too. The needs of ethnic minorities, including Gypsies/Travellers, must now be taken into account in the measurement of housing need and demand. We want to see how all that beds in, along with the specific work that we are doing, before we decide whether a national review is required.

Bill Wilson: You mentioned 24 local authorities; that is not all of them—

Alex Neil: There are eight more.

Bill Wilson: That is what I thought. Are eight missing because you think that they have entirely adequate provision, or are there other reasons why they are not taking part in the discussions?

Alex Neil: Eight authorities do not have any sites, and we are working with them where we think that there might be a demand for sites.

Bill Wilson: As you are aware, given that you alluded to it earlier, the unemployment rate among Gypsy Travellers is very high. What measures are proposed to address that?

Alex Neil: Often, it is about making people employment ready. That is where our interventions

can have the greatest impact and it is why we have given high priority to education. We believe that one reason, although it is not the only one, why the employment level among Gypsies/Travellers is lower and the unemployment level is higher is their level of educational attainment. By their very nature, such people are travelling around. We have therefore made education a high priority, and one of the drivers for that is to make Gypsies/Travellers more employment ready.

Bill Wilson: When you talk about education, are you talking about all age groups or specifically about Gypsy Travellers who fall within the school age group?

Alex Neil: I am talking primarily about the school age group, but adult education through colleges and other providers is also important. We are trying to ensure that education happens across the board. Obviously, many people in the Gypsy/Traveller community who are looking for employment are not of primary or secondary school age but are much older. We want to ensure, particularly through educational support, that they become employment ready, so that when they go to an interview, they stand as good a chance as anyone else, ideally, of getting the job.

Bill Wilson: You mentioned the legal system and the concerns about legal aid. At our meeting on 10 March, a Gypsy Traveller representative told us that their community finds it difficult to get legal representation. If I remember correctly, the example that she gave involved family law. A lawyer had said, "I don't deal with Gypsy Traveller issues because I don't understand them", in spite of the fact that the matter was a straightforward issue of family law. The individual therefore had difficulty getting representation.

Will the Government make inquiries of the Gypsy Traveller community to find out whether people find it difficult not just to get legal aid but to get access to lawyers, who say that they do not handle material that deals with the Gypsy Traveller community?

Alex Neil: I will do two things. First, I will ask officials to investigate the particular case that was highlighted to the committee to find out what the problem was and to determine whether we can assist in any way. Secondly, we will take up the general issue with the Gypsy/Traveller community to find out whether the case reflects a general problem or whether it is a one-off.

Bill Wilson: I welcome that assurance, minister. Thank you.

Hugh O'Donnell: The statement appears, in various places, to merge the issues of faith and race. That can be quite difficult, because within race we also have ethnicity. What is the largest minority ethnic group in Scotland?

Alex Neil: I think it would be English-born people, under our definition.

Hugh O'Donnell: My understanding was that it was actually the ethnic Irish, but that is a moot point, I suppose.

The Government is committed to developing representational groups. As far as I can see from the information that I have, it has picked up on the Muslim group, but surely, by definition, that is a religious group rather than an ethnic group. Why did you not pick on, for example, the Sikh group, and seek to raise its profile? Why did you pick the Muslim group? Was there a particular issue in relation to that group?

Alex Neil: If we picked every group as a priority, that would mean, by definition, that we did not have a priority. We decided to pick the Muslim group as a priority because of the difficulties that have occurred and our concerns about Islamophobia and other issues that affect that group. As we know from the problems that we have had in the past few years, there are particular issues, and the group has been subject to criticism—and unfair treatment, in some quarters—that other groups have not experienced. We therefore regard good relations with the Muslim community as a high priority and of prime importance.

You mentioned faith and race. I acknowledge that some groups can be considered in terms of both race and faith issues. Clearly, the issues are related, albeit that they are different as well.

11:45

Hugh O'Donnell: Have you had any representations from any elements of secular society regarding the support that the Government, and admittedly the previous Administration, has provided to interfaith groups?

Alex Neil: I have not had such representations as a minister. I cannot answer for my predecessor offhand, but I am sure that we can dig out that information for you and give you a specific reply.

Lesley Irving: A member of the Humanist Society of Scotland is involved in our working group on faith and belief relations. We wanted to include secular groups in that group, because it goes across society and does not cover just interfaith groups.

Alex Neil: I will ask my colleague Fergus Ewing whether he has received any representations. As you know, he was the minister who handled the Scottish Interfaith Council issue. If representations have been made recently, I suspect that they may have gone to Fergus Ewing, rather than to me.

Hugh O'Donnell: The Government justifiably prioritises Muslim groups. Have you a second priority for ethnic or religious groups in which you will seek to develop capacity?

Alex Neil: I do not have a second priority at the moment—the work is more across the board. We decided to make the Muslim group a priority, for the reasons that I gave you.

Willie Coffey: The statement refers to the development of identity as a means of tackling potential violent extremist threats in Scotland and in Scottish society. Can you say anything beyond what is in the statement about what the Government is doing in that regard? Can we draw on any lessons learned from our UK colleagues down south?

Alex Neil: That is quite a topical question, given the UK Government's announcement this morning. Clearly, we are working with the UK Government on fighting off and preventing potential attacks from violent extremist groups or any kind of terrorist attack. The Glasgow airport attack is still fresh enough in everybody's mind for the importance of that effort to be obvious.

As well as putting extra money into the police force and recruiting additional police, we have put in additional dedicated funding for the police to tackle terrorism. We have dedicated funding of £13 million a year on top of the normal police budget, which is an increase of £5.2 million in the past two years. Work is under way with the Association of Chief Police Officers in Scotland to deliver a further boost to the funding in the new financial year.

We continue to work with all the UK jurisdictions on a counter-terrorism strategy. We operate very much on a co-operative and close basis with the other Administrations in the UK to counter any potential threat. That includes addressing the issue that Willie Coffey asked about.

Malcolm Chisholm: I will focus on demographic change. The statement says, first:

"In a climate of declining population, migration is enabling Scotland to meet its population targets"

and, secondly, that

"Scotland's population is ageing but the age profile of minority ethnic communities is much younger. Our plans for the future need to reflect this".

I have a question about each of those statements. On the second statement, can we assume that the plans for the future already reflect the minority ethnic communities' younger age profiles? How is that reflected in the plans? If it is not, will it be considered later? I suppose the more fundamental question is about the population target and whether there is an accompanying migration target. Does the Government have an optimum

population target? If so, where and how would migration fit into that target?

Alex Neil: I do not think that we have an optimum population target. I read yesterday that Jonathan Porrit thinks that the whole of the UK can sustain a population of only 30 million. The latest projection for the UK is that our population could go up as high as 70 million to 75 million in the next 20 to 30 years.

The issue is the maldistribution of population in the UK. The south-east of England is extremely crowded and is about to become even more crowded, but the population density in the west of England and the north of England and Scotland is dramatically lower. There is no doubt in our mind that Scotland could sustain a higher population; I believe that, many hundreds of years ago, we had a higher population than England. Given that we make up one third of the UK landmass—and that we have a great many underlying strengths in our school and university system and can take advantage of many economic opportunities in the areas of renewable energy and life sciences, for example—we believe that we could sustain a higher population. However, our main concern at the moment is to stem decline, particularly as Scotland is facing the problem of an ageing population.

Birth rates have increased slightly in recent years. We cannot tell yet whether that is a long-term trend, but it is a welcome development. However, there is no doubt that the arrival of immigrants in large numbers, from Poland in particular, has not only increased the population above and beyond what would otherwise have happened, but has assisted with our age profile, because the migrant community has a younger age profile than the other communities in Scotland. That is all beneficial for the longer term.

Malcolm Chisholm: In general, then, you would encourage migration in the interests not only of keeping the population steady, but increasing it.

Alex Neil: There are many reasons for encouraging migration. For example, we believe that having more migration into Scotland would help Scotland to realise its full potential. We believe that our society is enriched by the more diverse community that immigration brings about. Further, when people come to this country, they bring with them links to their home countries; that is beneficial culturally, technologically, economically and in a range of other ways.

Bill Kidd: The Scottish Government's themes in the statement include references to refugees and asylum seekers. One theme talks of addressing the barriers that prevent

"people from those communities from achieving what they are capable of"

and another mentions increasing the participation of refugees and asylum seekers in

“all aspects of mainstream community and civic activity.”

To what extent can the Scottish Government achieve those aspirations, bearing in mind the split between reserved and devolved issues in this area?

Alex Neil: In many respects, ensuring that migrant and ethnic minority communities can play their full part in all aspects of Scottish society is more of a practical, day-to-day issue than a legislative issue. That is why we are using the funding that is available to us—it is not as great as we would like it to be, given the background of recession, credit crunch and the threat of a squeeze on public spending from next year—to support certain projects.

We are providing funding of around £2 million a year through the race, religion and refugee funding stream for 2008 to 2011. That is designed to improve the lives of minority ethnic and faith communities in Scotland, including refugees and asylum seekers as well as migrant workers and Gypsies/Travellers.

We are continuing the work of our predecessors, as we are all united on the issue—Malcolm Chisholm was formerly the minister responsible for this policy area. Since 2001, the Scottish Government has invested more than £12.5 million to aid the integration of refugees and asylum seekers in Scotland. In March 2007, the adult English for speakers of other languages strategy was launched, providing a blueprint to upgrade the quality and, where appropriate, the quantity of publicly funded ESOL provision across the college, community learning and development and voluntary sectors. That is an example of the activity that we are undertaking. We will send the committee a full list of the projects that we are funding, all of which are designed to achieve exactly the objective to which Bill Kidd referred.

Bill Kidd: That is good to know. At the moment, Scotland's ethnic minority population is relatively small compared with that of England. However, the Scottish Government is interested in increasing the rate of inward migration, to benefit Scottish society and the Scottish economy. With increased integration and larger numbers of migrants, are you confident that public attitudes to groups coming into the country will be positive, especially during a time of recession?

Alex Neil: I am confident that we are doing everything that we can to ensure that there is a positive approach to the policy. It is a fact of life that, if anything, the number of people from the minorities to which you refer who have come here has decreased. There is clear evidence that the recession here, the expansion in the Polish

economy and, in particular, the exchange rate between the pound and the Polish currency have encouraged a large number of Poles to go back to Poland. At the moment, the recession is reducing the number of migrant workers who are coming to or even staying in Scotland, which is the opposite of what we are trying to achieve. To be honest, for the next year, year and a half or two years, that is more likely to be the problem than a large influx of migrant workers or ethnic minority communities creating an attitude problem in the population here.

The Convener: Given that we are losing so many people as a result of the recession, are the migration targets likely to be extended for the foreseeable future?

Alex Neil: The impact of the recession will not be clear quantitatively until after the event, because the figures that are available tend to be published on an historical rather than a real-time basis. However, so far it appears that the recession has led to some economic migrants from eastern European Union countries returning to their home countries, rather than a larger number coming here. That was the case even before the recession, because of the impact of changes in exchange rates.

Hugh O'Donnell: I refer you to question S3W-11547, by the late Bashir Ahmad.

Alex Neil: Can you tell me what the question was?

Hugh O'Donnell: No—you tell me the answer first.

The question concerned forced marriages. In his reply, Stewart Maxwell stated:

“But the biggest concern was over racial segregation and that this might be seen as a minority law.” [*Official Report, Written Answers*, 21 April 2008; S3W-11547, 11548 and 11557.]

That was in relation to legislating, on a criminal law basis, on forced marriages. I appreciate that you have been in your post for only a short time, and that you might prefer to come back to me later with a response about what that actually means in the Government's view.

12:00

Alex Neil: On forced marriages, as I said earlier, we are talking to people at Westminster and we also have a consultation going on in Scotland. If it is okay with you, I would prefer to wait until we see the results of that consultation before making any specific commitments.

As far as that written answer is concerned, I presume that it related to putting forced marriages legislation in the wider context of what we are trying to achieve.

Hugh O'Donnell: We are both skirting round this area, and perhaps it would be better if your officials had a chance to look at the answer to which I have referred. That would give you some context.

Alex Neil: Yes.

Hugh O'Donnell: My final question is also partly related to the law. Does the Scottish Government see a place for Sharia law in its approach to race equality and in the Scottish judicial system?

Alex Neil: That is a very interesting question, and it is one with which we are engaged at the moment. It is primarily a question for my colleagues in the justice function, rather than for my function. It is interesting: I had a meeting the other day, and one of the areas of housing policy that I am considering is other ways of funding new housing supply. Under Islamic Sharia law, people are not allowed to earn interest. Housing finance is therefore engineered in such a way as to generate income purely from rental, rather than interest. That is a very good example of where we might learn from other financial practices, which could be applied in how we fund some aspects of housing policy.

It is a very wide question, and I would not wish to give you a simplistic answer. However, we will come back to you with a more detailed response about the areas that we are considering in relation to the wider question. At any rate, that is an example of where we could learn something that might be quite productive on the housing front.

The Convener: I wish to press you on the gender imbalance that could flow from that.

Alex Neil: What is the question, convener?

The Convener: Hugh O'Donnell asked about Sharia law. The question is about incorporating Sharia law, or accepting what place it could have in Scotland, and the gender implications of that.

Alex Neil: I do not have a definitive response to that question. May I take time to contemplate a reply and come back to you on it?

The Convener: That is your prerogative, minister.

Marlyn Glen: You are illustrating the importance of equalities across portfolios, minister. I wish to pass on a further question—it is a health question from the Glasgow Anti Racist Alliance. The alliance wishes an explanation on why there is no full patient ethnicity monitoring in NHS Scotland, which it has been urging.

Alex Neil: I am sure that the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing is dealing with that specific issue. I will ask her whether she can give you a detailed response. That is not specifically in my portfolio.

The Convener: Thank you, minister, for your full and detailed responses and for your offer to provide additional information, as well as taking cognisance of the committee's view on the various aspects of the race equality statement that we have examined. I thank everyone for their attendance.

Alex Neil: Thank you. We will come back to you with that follow-up information as quickly as we possibly can.

The Convener: That is very much appreciated.

To allow us to consider a timetable for taking oral evidence on our inquiry into female offenders in the criminal justice system, we move into private session for our final agenda item, as we agreed at a previous meeting.

12:04

Meeting continued in private until 12:51.

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