

EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE

Tuesday 27 October 2009

Session 3

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EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE

15th 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

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab)

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

*Margaret Smith (Edinburgh West) (LD)

Shirley-Anne Somerville (Lothians) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING GAVE EVIDENCE:

Alistair Brown (Scottish Government Finance Directorate)

Nuala Gormley (Scottish Government Housing and Regeneration Directorate)

Alex Neil (Minister for Housing and Communities)

Yvonne Strachan (Scottish Government Equalities, Social Inclusion and Sport Directorate)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Terry Shevlin

ASSISTANT CLERK

Rebecca Lamb

LOCATION

Committee Room 2

Scottish Parliament

Equal Opportunities Committee

Tuesday 27 October 2009

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 10:02*]

Interests

The Convener (Margaret Mitchell): Good morning and welcome to the 15th meeting in 2009 of the Equal Opportunities Committee. I remind all those who are present, including members, that mobile phones and BlackBerrys should be switched off completely as they interfere with the sound system even if they are switched to silent.

We have received apologies from Hugh O'Donnell, Willie Coffey and Elaine Smith. I am pleased to welcome Margaret Smith MSP as a substitute member. As this is her first attendance at the Equal Opportunities Committee, I invite her to declare any relevant interests.

Margaret Smith (Edinburgh West) (LD): I do not think that it is necessarily a declarable interest, but I am the honorary vice-president of the South Queensferry church's care in the community project—an organisation that provides services for elderly residents and their carers.

The Convener: That is duly noted. Thank you.

Draft Budget Scrutiny 2010-11

10:03

The Convener: The first item on our agenda is evidence on the Scottish Government's draft budget for 2010-11. As members will recall, the Minister for Housing and Communities first gave evidence to the committee on the draft budget on 22 September. However, at that time the Scottish Government's equality statement had not been published; therefore, the minister very kindly agreed to fit in an extra session on it, on which we now embark.

I welcome Alex Neil MSP, the Minister for Housing and Communities. I also welcome Yvonne Strachan, head of the Scottish Government's equality unit; Alistair Brown, deputy director of finance in the Scottish Government; and Nuala Gormley, principal research officer in the communities analytical services division of the Scottish Government. Minister, is there anything that you would like to say by way of an opening statement?

The Minister for Housing and Communities (Alex Neil): I will make a short statement, if that is okay. However, with your indulgence, I first welcome our friends from Nigeria who are in the public gallery. They are visiting the Parliament to see parliamentary practice in Scotland so that they can take any good ideas back to Nigeria.

I welcome the opportunity to return to the committee to discuss in more detail the equality statement that we published a few days after we published the draft budget for 2010-11. The statement sets out the action that the Scottish Government is taking and planning to take to ensure that the public money that we spend contributes to the progression of equality in Scotland. It also outlines how our proposed budget aligns with our equality objectives and how it will contribute to progress towards them in the future.

The draft budget prioritises front-line services, maintains efforts to promote economic recovery and seeks to protect individuals and households during this time of economic difficulty. In doing so, it focuses on delivering what matters most to people and to improving their life chances. We believe that what we do and the money that we spend should be directed at growing our economy and improving the lives of all our communities. It is, therefore, important that we find ways in which to ensure that we take account of equality considerations as we devise our policies and make our spending plans. It is even more important that we do so when there is pressure on resources.

In the equality statement, we have outlined the context and the things that have informed the consideration of equality in the budget process. Those include our national performance framework; the new ways of working and delivery that are reflected in the concordat and the programme of public sector reform; the public sector equality duties that help the process of mainstreaming equality into activities and policies that impact on the daily lives of our people; equality impact assessment and the collection and collation of equality data; and the work of the equality and the budget advisory group, which helps us to develop our processes and approaches to the consideration of equality in our policy and spending decisions. We have also highlighted in the statement the way in which each portfolio's budget contributes to the progression of equality in Scotland, following the same structure that is used in the draft budget document.

This is the first time that an equality statement has been produced to accompany the budget. We view it as an important step in our work on equality and the budget, and it is by no means the end point. We are keen to work with EBAG, over the coming year, to develop mechanisms for improving equality analysis with a view to feeding those into the next spending round. As I said at the committee's meeting in September, ministers look forward to receiving EBAG's report next summer and to discussing what needs to be done to give effective consideration to equality in the setting of the next budget. As part of the process of developing our thinking, we would be extremely happy to have input from the committee. We want to improve what we do in this area and would value your observations and contribution.

I look forward to our discussion this morning.

The Convener: On behalf of the committee, I, too, welcome the Nigerian visitors and everyone else who is in the public gallery.

Thank you for your opening statement, minister. To set the scene and crystallise this, can you give us a short, one-sentence description of the main intention of the equality statement?

Alex Neil: It is to mainstream equality and to ensure that equality considerations permeate all governmental decision making and budget setting.

The Convener: Right. That is helpful.

I wonder how you would respond to what appears to be a slight criticism from Professor David Bell. When he looked at the equality statement, he said that it appears to focus on

"listing particular events and initiatives that are promoting equality"

but that it

"does not link these to policy initiatives that relate specifically to new proposals contained in the 2010-11 Draft Budget."

Alex Neil: I do not agree with Professor Bell. I will give you a good example from my portfolio. The new energy assistance programme, which is the successor to the central heating and warm deal programmes, was developed as a result of widespread consultation particularly, but not solely, with the Scottish fuel poverty forum. A criticism of the old programmes was that they were not discerning enough in their target groups and that relatively wealthy people were receiving free central heating systems while other, less wealthy groups—in fact, people who were living in fuel poverty—were not being assisted at all by those programmes. As a result of the analysis and the recommendations that resulted from that analysis, we introduced the new energy assistance programme. Unlike the old programmes, it is targeted more at people who are in fuel poverty, including, for the first time, families with children under five, pregnant women and families with children under 16 who are disabled. That is a good example of our completely redesigning a programme to meet our equality objectives.

The Convener: How do you respond generally to Professor Bell's comments? Is it reasonably fair to say that there could be more effort to link the events or initiatives that are listed in the statement clearly to precise budget commitments?

Alex Neil: This is the first time that the equality statement, in this context, has been produced side by side with the budget. We would be the first to say that there is a great deal of room for further improvement in making clearer the linkages between our policies and our spending decisions.

In essence, the process has four or five stages. First, evidence is taken on what needs to be done to achieve our strategic objectives. Secondly, we decide policy—the equality impact assessment procedure is an integral part of policy development. Once we have developed the policies, we set the budgets for those policies, and then consider the outcomes that we are trying to achieve. We then measure those and, at some point, we go back round the circle to see whether the outcomes that we desire are being achieved by the policy and the spend profile that we have agreed.

Malcolm Chisholm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab): An interesting and important part of the equality statement says:

"As we ... move out of recession ... consideration of equality matters becomes more, not less, important."

It goes on to say:

"We need to be able to capitalise on the skills and talents of all and avoid the further marginalisation of vulnerable groups."

Those vulnerable groups are listed as older men, lone parents, disabled people and others. Will you give specific examples of policies that were adapted for the groups that are highlighted in that section of the statement in order to mitigate the impact of the recession on those groups?

Alex Neil: Probably the best example is that £83.1 million-worth of priority 1 European social fund money, which is very much targeted at priority groups, has been brought forward. The priority groups that the £83.1 million is targeted at include long-term unemployed and inactive people; unemployed inactive lone parents and other carers; unemployed inactive people with mental health problems, long-term illness, disabilities or learning difficulties; unemployed inactive people from ethnic minority groups; and individuals experiencing persistent part-time seasonal employment.

That is a substantive programme, but it is by no means the only programme. The ScotAction programme that was announced by the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning is designed primarily as a counter-recessionary measure. Bringing forward our capital spend from next year into this year and, to a lesser extent, last year, was also designed to do that, especially in housing. A large part of that spend is being spent on the affordable housing investment programme, which primarily assists people who are in income deciles 1 to 4.

Those are examples of measures that we have taken, with the powers and resources that are available to us, that are designed to be counter-recessionary.

Malcolm Chisholm: You stated that spending plans are to show more clearly the links between evidence, policy, spending and equality outcomes. Can you provide a few examples of where policy and spend have led to positive equality outcomes?

Alex Neil: When we are talking about outcomes, we are not talking about the draft budget for next year because, by definition, outcomes can come only from previous budgets. However, I will pick an example of a good thing that was done by the previous Administration—including your good self. Free personal care was a trailblazing policy that was introduced a number of years ago by the Labour-Liberal Administration, with support from my party and the Tories. There are clear signs that free personal care has had a positive impact on the quality of care for our older people.

As you know, Lord Sutherland was brought in by Nicola Sturgeon last year to review how the policy was working. His report not only provided a lot of

useful information on how well the policy was doing, but identified areas that still needed to be addressed. As a result of his recommendations, an additional £40 million is being spent on free personal care in Scotland. I would suggest that once the evaluation is done, it will show very positive outcomes on the care of the elderly.

10:15

Malcolm Chisholm: It was kind of you to mention a policy from a previous era. Can you think of any policies in the past three years that have led to equality outcomes?

Alex Neil: We have 73 different projects on the issue of violence against women. The issue has received all-party support in the Parliament. The evaluation work that we have done on the issue shows that the refuges that are being provided—I opened a new one in Glasgow a few months ago—are having an extremely important and effective impact on the protection of women against domestic abuse.

Malcolm Chisholm: To follow up on that topic, action on domestic abuse is a key area for the Scottish Government, as it was for the previous Administration. It is also important under the gender equality duty. In the statement, could there have been clearer links—for example under the housing and regeneration budget—with priorities that are strategically relevant to the work on domestic abuse?

Alex Neil: The issue of violence against women was covered in three policy areas in the equality statement. It was a substantial section under my portfolio—housing, regeneration and equalities—and there were sections in the education and justice areas. Violence against women is a good example of an issue that is not departmentalised. Although we, along with justice, tend to take the lead on it, the fact that it has appeared under three portfolio headings indicates the way in which we are trying to ensure that the need to tackle the problem permeates the Administration.

Marlyn Glen (North East Scotland) (Lab): The moves forward on that are greatly appreciated throughout Scotland. However, I have a more specific question. The map of gaps research showed what it called a postcode lottery of service provision. Is there something specific in the budget to rectify that?

Alex Neil: In terms of violence against women?

Marlyn Glen: Yes, and in the provision of refuges.

Alex Neil: One of the issues that the violence against women group is considering is how we universalise the standard of delivery. I accept entirely that we still have a way to go, particularly

on the quality of refuge facilities, which is variable throughout Scotland. If we consider the contribution that is made by the affordable housing investment budget, for example towards funding for refuges, and the work that we are doing more generally with housing associations, local authorities and others, you are right to say that there are gaps. There is still too much variation between different parts of the country, particularly in rural areas. I am extremely concerned about the lack of adequate facilities for women who are the subject of domestic abuse and violence in many of our rural areas. I fully accept that.

Bill Kidd (Glasgow) (SNP): In the budget equality statement, each budget portfolio lists various wide-ranging actions and events that are all meant to promote equality. For example, under the office of the First Minister, the statement talks about the national museums and the aim of improving accessibility with

“street level entrance and lifts and escalators”.

Under the education and lifelong learning heading, the statement talks about aims

“to improve outcomes for looked after children”,

policies on lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people, and college and university admissions processes. Under justice, there are domestic abuse cases. There is a huge range of information across the portfolios, but the level of detail is not really comparable. It varies widely, and there is no standard format, which makes it difficult to draw comparisons between the various portfolios to judge whether some of them are achieving and others are not. Did the directorates receive guidance to help them to support the material for the statement?

Alex Neil: We provided overall guidance on the kind of statement that we were looking for from each portfolio. However, I accept that we have a way to go in the provision and presentation of information.

Let me make two points. First, in some policy areas, it is quite difficult to analyse and measure outcomes in terms of their impact on equalities. Environment is a good example of that. It is difficult to discern and to disaggregate outcomes of environment policies in terms of their impact on certain age groups, gender, disability and so on. In policy areas such as health, education, housing and justice, it is a lot easier to disaggregate outcomes, but there are policy areas in which no Government anywhere in the world—we have looked into the problem—has solved those issues.

Secondly, I accept that presentationally—EBAG will consider this issue in preparing its report for next summer—we could improve the way in which information is presented by portfolios so that the

equality statement is easier to read and so that comparisons can be made more easily. Again, I would very much welcome the committee's views and recommendations on how we should do that.

Nuala Gormley sits on a four-nations committee that looks at all aspects of community analysis across Government, including the measurement of equality. By comparison with efforts in London, Cardiff and Belfast, our equality statement is way ahead of the game in the United Kingdom. Having said that, we could learn a lot from international practice elsewhere, particularly from some regional Parliaments and Governments in other parts of Europe. We are considering how Scotland might import that better practice into the UK.

Bill Kidd: I thank the minister for that fairly comprehensive reply, even though he ended up by agreeing that we still have a way to go.

I want to follow up on the commitment in the equality statement that the Government will work with EBAG in developing equality analysis for the next budget. Angela O'Hagan, who is a major player in EBAG, became aware only on 4 September that a budget equality statement would be published. In his opening statement, the minister mentioned that EBAG will provide the necessary information and data for the success of implementation of equality policies across portfolios. To what extent were all members of EBAG involved in the production of the equality statement? Given that some members of the group perhaps did not participate fully, will that participation develop for the production of the report in the spring?

Alex Neil: First, it is important to understand that the role of EBAG is not to write the equality statement or to provide a direct input on substance and policy issues in the draft budget. The job of EBAG is to look at the processes by which we put together and link evidence, policy, budgets and outcomes. That is where EBAG's expertise comes in. At any one time, EBAG would not necessarily be aware of what we are doing in producing specific budget documents or equality statements. EBAG looks at processes.

Perhaps Yvonne Strachan, who is the chair of EBAG, can provide further illumination on that.

Yvonne Strachan (Scottish Government Equalities, Social Inclusion and Sport Directorate): The issues about last year's budget that were raised by this committee and by the Finance Committee were considered by EBAG in the course of the year. In our workshop in May, we had a wide-ranging discussion on how we could improve matters. One idea that was suggested was that an alternative statement could be published alongside the budget, given the need to bear in mind the constraints on the budget

document that have previously been shared with the committee. The Government drew on that discussion—about the possibility of producing a budget equality statement—and it was taken forward internally with ministers and with finance officials. To that extent, EBAG informed how we went about matters. However, the detail of the equality statement and its construction and publication were not discussed or shared with EBAG in detail for the reasons that the minister has described. We have made it clear that we do not expect EBAG to produce our documents. EBAG provides expertise to advise us and guide us on how we take forward our responsibilities as Government. That is very much what EBAG has done in its work to date.

Over the next period, as we develop the programme, the input of EBAG into the mechanisms and processes that we use will be very influential. Therefore, as we come to the final report in June, EBAG might well have a different role in the construction of the document. We will be very happy to explore that. However, that is where we have been up to this point.

The Convener: That is helpful, but I think that our point is that, while understanding the limitations on EBAG's involvement, we recognise the big contribution that EBAG can make in providing valid and informed comment. It might have been good to make EBAG aware of when the equality statement would be made available, given the group's interest in the matter.

Yvonne Strachan: I accept that. I am sorry if I did not give an indication of the value that is attached to the contribution that the group has made over the period. In fact, the equality statement would not have been produced if we had not had those on-going discussions with EBAG and been influenced by the work that has been done.

On the issue of sharing when the equality statement would be published, we indicated our intended date as early as we could. However, that is part of the process and we accept the point that we should try in future to make that information available as early as possible.

The Convener: I am sure that that will be appreciated by the group.

Marlyn Glen: I have some questions about equality impact assessments, on which we want further detail. The equality statement provides quite a list of examples of how the Government uses, or intends to use, EqlAs in its development of initiatives and policy areas. Can the minister provide a specific example of how the EqlA process informed policy development and the subsequent budgetary allocation? To use a topical example, was an impact assessment done on the

swine flu strategy before the budget for it was allocated?

Alex Neil: We have had two EqlAs on pandemic flu, one of which was done in co-operation with our friends down south in Whitehall, while the other was on the guidance in Scotland.

It might be useful if I explain a bit more about the EqlA process. The EqlA process must be an integral part of all policy development when we consider a new policy, such as preparation for pandemic flu. For example, one EqlA considered the design of the helpline for dealing with pandemic flu—these considerations are not exclusive to the current strain of swine flu but could apply to how we deal with any flu pandemic—and the assessment highlighted a number of issues. Language was an obvious issue for some members of the community, including the British Sign Language community. Another issue was age, which can affect people's familiarity with and understanding of how to use a helpline. The policy on pandemic flu is a good example because the two EqlAs influenced the policy both north and south of the border.

Marlyn Glen: Obviously, that was a massive undertaking. As you were talking, it struck me that how men react to such campaigns might also be a big equality issue.

Can you provide any other examples, given that you said that EqlAs are conducted in all policy areas?

Alex Neil: For the energy assistance package that I mentioned earlier, we are doing another EqlA because the whole point of the package is to reorientate resources so that they are targeted more effectively.

To give you an order of magnitude, we have done 89 EqlAs and 294 are in progress throughout Government. No new policy should be developed without at least one EqlA—in some cases, there will be more—to ensure that it is equality proofed.

Marlyn Glen: Thank you—that is clear.

You referred to the development of new policies. Will you also return to policies that were developed before and ensure that they are impact assessed?

Alex Neil: Absolutely. There are two separate processes. We have the EqlA process, and from time to time there are separate evaluations of both the performance and impact of individual policies. I think I am correct to say that any terms of reference for such evaluations would include the impact on equality. I look to Alistair Brown to confirm that.

Alistair Brown (Scottish Government Finance Directorate): They certainly should do.

10:30

Yvonne Strachan: May I add something in answer to the question about existing or older policies? In the advice and guidance that we give policy makers, we ask them to think about policies that might have significant impacts on people. If they have not been the subject of an EqlA or are about to be reviewed or changed, we ask them to consider when would be the opportune time to undertake an EqlA. We suggest that an EqlA be undertaken when a long-standing policy comes up for review or circumstances change.

EqlAs are easier to do for new policies than for existing policies, for which they can be difficult, but we aim to ensure that they are done. We seek to address the matter proportionately. The emphasis should be placed on new policies but—where possible—we go back to look at existing policies that are under review.

Alex Neil: I should say that the process is not just internal: in every EqlA we consult key stakeholders. For example, on pandemic flu and the energy assistance package, we are consulting key stakeholders to ensure that we get things right.

Marlyn Glen: I would like to delve a little bit deeper. I asked the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing about the matter at our previous meeting and, in her written reply to the committee, she gave an example of an EqlA, but I was looking for proof of their effectiveness. Are there examples of EqlA processes that have highlighted that a policy would have a strongly negative impact on one equality group but a strongly positive impact on another? If so, how was the situation resolved? The example that the health secretary gave was that a range of maternity wear has been made available for NHS staff. I thought that that was quite a minor example; I presume that pregnant women must still wear uniform. Is there other evidence that EqlAs are effective?

Alex Neil: The question was asked the last time I appeared at the committee, when I said that we know of no ready example of a case in which an EqlA identified an equality issue that was then ignored in a policy's development. We have double checked and cannot find such an example; to the best of our knowledge, there are no examples of that happening in any substantive policy issue. It should not happen, because the whole point is that the EqlA is part of the policy development process, whether it is a brand new policy or we are revisiting or reviewing an existing policy. If an EqlA identified equality issues that should be addressed but they were ignored, I do not see how the policy would be approved, because to ignore the EqlA would defeat its purpose.

Marlyn Glen: Maybe I am not making myself clear. I would not expect anybody to ignore the result of an assessment, but I might expect people to change their mind about a policy because of an assessment. They might say, "This result was not expected until we did the assessment." That is a test of the worth of the assessment. If you assess all the policies and they all turn out to be fine, what is the point of doing EqlAs?

Alex Neil: Last time I was here, I gave the example of the drugs strategy, the EqlA for which influenced aspects of that strategy. This morning, I mentioned the pandemic flu helpline: it is fair to say that the EqlA influenced the design of the helpline and changed views on particular aspects of the most effective way in which to deliver it. There are many examples in which EqlAs have positively changed people's thoughts about the delivery of services, because they have identified issues that needed to be addressed in the delivery of policies.

Marlyn Glen: It would be helpful if you could furnish the committee with more examples of that.

Alex Neil: Okay.

The Convener: We are looking specifically at how to balance conflicting interests.

Alex Neil: That can be thrown up by an EqlA or by general policy development. In enterprise policy, the small business bonus scheme is probably a good example. It is difficult to evaluate its impact precisely, but anecdotal evidence suggests that the scheme has had a very positive impact on the small business community in Scotland. That is the upside. We could, however, argue that the downside is that we have less revenue coming in because of the scheme.

There are upsides and downsides to any policy, but as long as we know what they are, we can make informed decisions about how to balance them, and about what the policy should be. We have to decide on our priorities from different sets of policies. There are demands for us to spend more money on a wide range of projects but, like every government, we have to sit down and work out our priorities, which are based essentially on the policies that will make the greatest contribution to achieving our strategic objectives, within the envelope of affordability in the budget that is available to us.

The Convener: I suppose I was thinking more of, for example, some of the religious groups that may be opposed to some rights, or equality impact statements that have impacted on policy and changed a certain issue that may be important to a religious group—that kind of thing. Where do faith schools fit into the picture? Are there beliefs that might be challenged by rights that are given to groups?

Alex Neil: As you know, our system of faith schools is not similar to that south of the border. To the best of my knowledge, we have a legal commitment in relation to the Roman Catholic Church, for example, dating from 1918. Obviously, that is something that every Government adheres to.

The grant that the Scottish Interfaith Council received last year is probably an example, but that was for a specific project and purpose, and it would have been properly assessed before the grant was approved.

The Convener: Okay. If you can have a further think about the issue, the committee would welcome that, because it goes to the heart of some of the issues that we have to deal with.

Bill Wilson (West of Scotland) (SNP): In February 2003, the previous Administration published "Making Progress: Equality Annual Report", which included an equality budget statement. Did you consider that when you developed your equality statement?

Alex Neil: I have that report here.

Bill Wilson: There you go. Did it have any influence?

Alex Neil: Obviously, we do look back. However, I remind the committee that the 2003 report was in a different context. It was an annual report that was meant to be more commentary than part of the policy-making process. It was a general report on progress on equality. Annex A dealt specifically with the Scottish budget equality statement, as it was then called. We looked at that when we were considering how to format our equality statement. Some aspects of it were helpful, but others were perhaps not so helpful. That report certainly was not done in anything like the detail that we have in the equality statement that we produced in September. However, it was a useful document, although it was never repeated.

Bill Wilson: On its never being repeated, will there be an equality statement next year? If so, what specific improvements would you make? You mentioned that some improvements are required.

Alex Neil: Our intention is to have another equality statement next year, but we will make a final decision once we have seen the report from EBAG next summer. I make that caveat because we would like to tie in the statement more with the three-year comprehensive spending review. As members will know, there should have been a comprehensive spending review this year, which would have covered the next three years. There has not been a CSR this year, but I hope that there will be one next year, irrespective of who wins the Westminster elections. EBAG's remit for its report next summer is to consider applying the

process beyond a year-to-year basis. We want to ensure that equality is mainstreamed as far as possible in decisions about our three-year comprehensive spending plan.

Bill Wilson: Would you consider using the present report as a baseline for future reports in order to track changes?

Alex Neil: We will do so. As I highlighted at the committee's previous meeting, one of the problems is that we do not always have the necessary baseline data in some areas to measure progress. However, we are getting much more sophisticated in that respect. The level and quality of data that we now have in some areas, which have been developed over the past 10 years or so, are exceptional. For example, on the incidence and concentration of poverty in Scotland, the Scottish index of multiple deprivation is now extremely robust and helpful in trying to identify trends in relative poverty in Scotland. That is a very good example of how on-going and high-quality gathering, collating and analysing of information is directly informing policy and spend.

Bill Wilson: You commented earlier on some good practices of other European Union regional Governments. Did you make use of any such examples? Can you give me examples of your having used international practice in compiling the equality statement? If you did not do that, how might you hope to do so in the future?

Alex Neil: Nuala Gormley, who is involved in this area, has told me that Andalucía is particularly far ahead in that respect. I ask Nuala to come in with more detail on how we have been looking at that.

Nuala Gormley (Scottish Government Housing and Regeneration Directorate): I am principally involved with the four-nations group of analysts in the UK, which is looking at equalities data and reports in respect of all our commitments. We all genuinely seek to improve practice based on the evidence base, reporting and aiming to develop a credible narrative for progress on equalities. In that context, there is a useful opportunity for all the analysts in the four nations to pick up best practice. Andalucía is certainly one that we all look to with a lot of interest because of its particular approach and the attention that it has paid to the issues and data around its equality statements. Our group within the Scottish Government is starting to develop a Scottish equalities evidence and statistics plan that will run for three or four years, which will provide us with a good and cohesive plan that will serve us with better data for EqIAs to pick up best practice from elsewhere and work with initiatives such as the equalities measurement framework. A concerted and sustained improvement effort around our equalities data is therefore going on,

which is genuinely picking up on best practice elsewhere.

The Convener: Thank you. That was very helpful.

Margaret Smith: The minister touched on the importance of having the correct data on which to build policy and, indeed, budget spend. On page 9 of the equality statement, you cover the information base: you talk about the national social surveys, in which this committee has been interested over the years. How exactly would you use information, from a national social survey on attitudes in Scotland, to shape policy?

Secondly, you say on page 9 that

“through the Economic & Social Research Council ... and ... Collaborative Schemes, we will be supporting and increasing research capacity on issues concerning diversity”

in the next few years. Can you give us a bit more information about that?

10:45

Alex Neil: Yes. The most recent Scottish social attitudes survey showed that progress has been made on substantially reducing the negative attitude to the lesbian and gay community, which was previously not the case. Obviously, we want to look behind that to find out why, and to find out whether the policies that we have pursued have helped, and whether we can do more to help to change attitudes further and get a much more tolerant approach. That is an example of how we would look at the survey and the trend of attitudes, and assess where progress has been made or where the trend has gone backwards and there has been no progress. That would then inform us of areas where we need to do more work to find out what is behind the figures and whether we need to do more in policy development and/or spend. We would therefore use the surveys as a tool to inform policy and to identify areas in which we perhaps need to do more or do things differently because we are not achieving our strategic objectives.

On increased funding for the Economic and Social Research Council, I am not sure whether Alistair Brown or Nuala Gormley has detail on that.

Nuala Gormley: Through the office of the chief researcher, a programme of collaboration between the ESRC and the Scottish Government has been in development for a number of years. On support for equalities policy on the communities side, we have developed a number of studentships and PhDs on issues of specifically Scottish interest. I suppose what that says is that we have been an enthusiastic user of an opportunity that presents good value for money for the Scottish

Government. It is also part of a capacity-building effort to ensure that we have young academics coming through from universities who have a good policy perspective on the key policy issues for us.

Margaret Smith: Can you give us examples of those kinds of projects?

Alex Neil: I am happy to supply you with more detail on not just some of but all the projects that we are involved in—that would not be a problem.

Margaret Smith: That would be excellent.

Nuala Gormley: On the first question, the Scottish social attitudes survey is one of our main research instruments. We have, within that, a discrimination module, and a new one is about to be commissioned. We have also paid attention, across all the Scottish social surveys, to improving the demographic data that we pick up in order to try to improve, in our samples of the equalities groups, what we understand about them and the information on their views and attitudes. That is all part of our concerted effort to understand fully the data that we hold, and to assess where we need to use estimates and where we can rely on census data.

Margaret Smith: It becomes a slightly chicken-and-egg situation in that, when people feel that there is more tolerance of them as a group, they are more willing to volunteer data, which thereby improves—we hope—policy development.

I was pleased to hear what the minister said about free personal care for the elderly, having been the convener of the previous Health and Community Care Committee at the time of that policy's introduction. Malcolm Chisholm was my deputy. That is an example of a policy coming from a parliamentary committee's work.

The Equal Opportunities Committee has, in the past, looked in some depth at disability. I have a particular question about your public sector duty to provide leadership on disability equality. The equality statement says that you have identified what your priorities should be for gender equality. In that regard, we have talked this morning about violence against women, which is an important issue. However, the statement says:

“The areas for co-ordination on disability are yet to be finalised.”

Can you give us more information about that? Will the work on disability that this committee undertook play any part in the final decisions?

Alex Neil: The answer to Margaret Smith's last question is yes. We will consider what the committee has said and will consult the other relevant parliamentary committees.

There are a number of strands to the work that we are doing; I am particularly interested in

independent living. Disabled groups in Scotland and the key stakeholders say that the development of independent living mechanisms is a high priority for them. In my view, independent living goes a long way towards allowing disabled people to play a much fuller part in decisions about their lives, and it enables them to participate more fully in the general life of the community and of society as a whole.

In terms of our overall approach to disability and the priorities that we set, there are so many competing demands that we must determine where we can most effectively put our resources. In the lead-up to the three-year comprehensive spending review, we will want to ensure that we can make significant progress in that key area over the three-year period. We must put our money where we will get the best return for it. Alistair Brown is itching to say something on that.

Alistair Brown: No, I was looking past you, minister, to Yvonne Strachan.

Yvonne Strachan: You asked specifically about the four areas and where they came from. As you know, ministers had a responsibility to report progress on disability issues across the public sector and did so in December 2008. We produced six reports outlining that progress. In addition, we produced a report that outlined potential areas for co-ordination. Out of that work, which was informed by the work of the committee—there has been an on-going, collaborative exercise among all those who are interested in advancing disability equality—the four areas to emerge were, as the minister has said, independent living, employability, transitions and the tackling of poverty.

The view of the people with whom we have discussed those matters recently—including the public sector, disability organisations and disabled people—is that independent living is the umbrella under which all those things sit and are connected. Therefore, the work on independent living that the minister is leading in concert with disabled people, the Equality and Human Rights Commission and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities is designed to advance work in all those areas. The decision is not yet finalised because we wanted to ensure that, if there were any additional elements to the work, we would be able to take them into account before we drove forward the independent living programme.

Margaret Smith: What will be the timetable? What will be your next couple of steps?

Alex Neil: A stakeholder forum with which we are in regular discussion is looking specifically at independent living and is due to report by next summer or thereabouts. Is that correct?

Yvonne Strachan: Yes. That work will be on-going to March 2011, but we will be updated on it.

Alex Neil: It is an iterative process, in a sense. It is not just a one-off; the stakeholder group is doing important, on-going work. The EHRC is involved in that along with the Scottish Government and the key stakeholders.

Margaret Smith: If that group proposed the development of a policy on independent living, how would that work? Would it immediately go further up the pecking order as something for you to look at?

Alex Neil: In a sense, we have invited that. We are keen to do more to promote independent living, and the stakeholder group is considering ways in which we can do that. As and when the group makes recommendations to us, we will review the evidence and will consider those recommendations as part of the policy-making process. Undoubtedly, at least one EqIA will be undertaken as a result of the recommendations. If there is more than one substantive recommendation, more than one EqIA may be undertaken. We will then finalise the policy and decide how much spend is required to implement it and where it fits into our wider priorities. From day 1, we must be clear about the outcomes that we are trying to achieve from the policy and the spend.

The Convener: That completes our questioning. Is there anything the minister or any of the other panellists would like to say in closing?

Alex Neil: We look forward to the committee's report on the equality statement and we will take seriously any recommendations that you make for its improvement. We recognise that it is early days in the development of an equality statement. We are ahead of the other three nations in the UK, but we can learn from our colleagues in other parts of Europe: we will do so and we will take seriously any views or recommendations that come from the committee.

The Convener: Thank you. The equality statement is key to ensuring that the crucial links exist between policy spending and equality outcomes. I hope that today's meeting will help to improve that process for the future, as well as being an acknowledgement of what has taken place in the equality statement. The committee widely welcomes the statement and notes that such a statement has not previously been published. We are also grateful to the minister and his officials for fitting in an evidence session today.

As agreed at previous meetings, we move into private session for consideration of the two remaining agenda items—our draft report to the Finance Committee on the Scottish Government's draft budget for 2010-11 and our draft report on the committee's female offenders inquiry.

10:56

Meeting continued in private until 12:48.

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