

EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE

Tuesday 3 November 2009

Session 3

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EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE

16th 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:

Colin Chisholm (Scottish Parliament Human Resources Office)

Aneela McKenna (Scottish Parliament Strategy and Development Office)

Mike Pringle (Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Terry Shevlin

ASSISTANT CLERK

Rebecca Lamb

LOCATION

Committee Room 4

Scottish Parliament

Equal Opportunities Committee

Tuesday 3 November 2009

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 10:00*]

Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body Equalities Report 2008/09

The Convener (Margaret Mitchell): Good morning, everyone, and welcome to the 16th meeting in 2009 of the Equal Opportunities Committee. I remind all who are 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 received apologies from Hugh O'Donnell and Bill Wilson, but I am pleased to welcome Shirley-Anne Somerville as Bill Wilson's substitute.

Item 1 is evidence from the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body on its equalities annual report for 2008-09. I welcome Mike Pringle from the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body; Colin Chisholm, who is the head of human resources in the Scottish Parliament; and Aneela McKenna, who is the Scottish Parliament's equalities manager and who is well known to the committee. Would Mike Pringle like to say anything by way of an opening statement?

Mike Pringle (Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body): Thank you, convener. I will say just a few words. I thank you for inviting me to give evidence today on behalf of the corporate body. As you will be aware, the SPCB has continued its strong commitment to equalities through another progressive year. We took the approach of using the end of the Parliament's first decade as an opportunity to consider how to take equal opportunities forward in the organisation over the coming years.

Our current strategy for equalities has worked well to date, by creating a robust infrastructure for successful implementation and progress of our equality goals. We have continued to make progress in the actions that are detailed within our three equality schemes on race, disability and gender. However, as the committee will see from our annual report, those are not the only areas in which we have worked hard to ensure that progress has been made. For example, we have revised the members' expenses scheme and have developed and implemented a new engagement strategy that is aimed at people who are less

engaged with the Parliament's work, and we have implemented a maternity mentoring scheme to provide support for staff who are going on, or returning from, maternity, extended paternity or adoption leave.

Now that a strong equality infrastructure has been achieved to fulfil our aims of promoting a culture of fairness and respect and enabling everyone to have the same opportunity to participate in, and contribute to, the Parliament's activities, a fresh and evolving approach to equalities has, and is being, developed. That new approach has three main objectives: to minimise bureaucracy, to deliver equalities in practice and to streamline our approach to equality.

Work on the new approach has already started by the removal of the layers of reporting through directorates and the creation of a single annual report that covers all the equalities work that has been undertaken. We will also move towards a single equalities scheme in 2010, which will bring our current scheme and the other, as yet uncovered, strands into one scheme and action plan. In addition, our new approach to equality impact assessment is being rolled out across the organisation and is being built into its current processes with a view to creating a more systematic and streamlined approach to mainstreaming impact assessments.

By ensuring that equality underpins all that we do, and that the SPCB continues to be proactive in promoting equality, we will develop further our positive culture, which will be vital in leading the organisation forward.

The Convener: The United Kingdom Government Equality Bill will require the SPCB to fulfil updated public sector duties. Will you outline what changes it will bring about in how equality is promoted and delivered by the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body?

Mike Pringle: It is unlikely that the SPCB will be affected both by the general and by the specific duties of the UK Government Equality Bill—it is expected that it will be included in the list of public bodies that are subject to the specific duties. It will be up to UK ministers to decide how public bodies should fulfil those duties and, despite a recent UK Government consultation on the specific duties, there is still no definitive answer as to what they will include. However, we know that we will be expected to set equality objectives for all eight strands, and to demonstrate how our policies have been assessed to take account of equalities. That will require extensive consultation on the five additional strands, as was carried out for the race, disability and gender equality schemes.

The Convener: Can you give any more detail on what will be done with the new equality strands

in line with what has been done—as you outlined in your opening statement—on race, disability and gender? There is also potentially a strand on class, which is quite an interesting one.

Mike Pringle: It is reassuring to report that we have already taken steps to address both those areas. We have developed a maternity mentoring programme for women on maternity leave and who are pregnant, and maternity staff networking to support women in maternity issues. There is obviously quite a lot coming out in the Equality Bill and it is not all in the public domain yet. We are therefore also monitoring what is going on within the bill and we are keeping an eye on the strategies.

I have to say that I am not aware of anything that has come out on class. I do not know whether either of my colleagues can comment.

Aneela McKenna (Scottish Parliament Strategy and Development Office): As Mike Pringle said, we are putting together the single equality scheme next year and one of our commitments is that it will extend to all the protected characteristics that are identified in the Equality Bill. We will also include socioeconomic status within our equality impact assessment process. We felt very strongly about that, because socioeconomic status is linked to poverty, which is linked to inequality. We therefore decided to build socioeconomic status into our impact assessment process to ensure that we consider class issues in how we do things in the organisation.

The Convener: Do you foresee any problems in any way, shape or form?

Mike Pringle: As I said, it is an on-going process. I do not think that we will have any problems. I think that the Parliament is very good at equalities: the organisation is constantly keeping an eye on issues that come up as a result of the Equality Bill, responding to them and taking cognisance of what comes forward.

Colin Chisholm (Scottish Parliament Human Resources Office): Our feeling is that we are in quite a strong position, but it is difficult, until we know the details of the bill, for us to respond to it in a detailed way. Perhaps we will be able to provide more detail on how we will respond at a later meeting.

The Convener: That is a fair comment.

Marlyn Glen (North East Scotland) (Lab): At the end, the report states that there is a new approach to equality impact assessments, which will become a major part of future annual report information. Can you outline for the committee how that new tool will work?

Mike Pringle: I am happy to do that. The tool is a new process for conducting equality impact

assessments. Its purpose is to identify whether a current or proposed policy is likely to have different impacts on equality groups. That will ultimately help us to remove barriers that lead to exclusion or any other form of discrimination.

As part of the process, we have created an online tool, which has been tailored to fit within the SPCB's corporate structures. EqlAs will become a mandatory requirement for any paper that is issued by the SPCB, the strategic leadership team or the operational management group. That captures all policy-level activities, including all strategic and operational projects. Its incorporation into those processes will allow the tool to be properly monitored and will help to share the responsibility across all business areas for ensuring that EqlAs are being completed.

Marlyn Glen: Can you give us a practical example?

Aneela McKenna: I suppose that the EqlA tool can be used across a range of areas. We want to make it mandatory at policy level, so that if there is a review or a new policy is being proposed, we will expect an EqlA to be done for it. We have already been doing impact assessments, but not through a formal process. For example, we had to ensure that accessibility issues were considered in relation to the new security arrangements. We did that by thinking about what were the main equalities issues that we would have to consider for the new arrangements.

Marlyn Glen: Do you see any possible tensions being caused by incorporating the new equality strands, for example religion and belief, and sexual orientation?

Mike Pringle: No. I do not think that there will be a problem.

Aneela McKenna: In the wider context, we already know that there are some tensions with regard to legislation that relates specifically to sexual orientation and to religion and belief. We will have to make a judgment on that basis when we carry out equality impact assessments. We must, as an organisation, ensure that we do not condone discriminatory beliefs in how we do things, and we must at the same time accommodate the needs of our visitors and our staff.

Marlyn Glen: The issue of religious observance arose at the event that we held in the Parliament last week, in relation to the fact that the event was held on a Friday. I would expect you to be aware of that type of difficulty, but how do you go about balancing people's different demands?

Aneela McKenna: We will have to consult widely with religious groups and with lesbian and gay groups. I know that Stonewall has done a

considerable amount of work on how the two relevant pieces of legislation work together and on how organisations should adopt good practice on the issue. We must involve others if we have to make any difficult decisions in that area.

Marlyn Glen: I suppose that it is about considering things reasonably, and striking a balance. I just became aware that any committee events that I have attended have always been held on a Friday, and this week was the second or third time that somebody said, "Do you realise it's difficult for some people to attend on a Friday because of religious observance?" I wanted to flag that up to you.

How will you ensure that SPCB employees embrace the new EqIA tool and do not treat it simply as a box-ticking exercise?

Mike Pringle: It is clearly important that everyone in the organisation engages with the process. For that reason, we have created a tool that is simple and effective, and we have stressed that it is not a new process but a tool to assist staff in thinking about equality issues in reviewing or developing a policy. We do not want to dismiss all the good work that has already been achieved in assessing the impact of equality on activities that have been undertaken so far. We need to ensure that staff are aware of what the new procedures are. I think that the organisation finds staff to be receptive, willing to consider new changes and to embrace new developments such as the new EqIA tool.

Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Good morning. Has EqIA made you think differently about the type of work that you do? Has it brought additional burdens or workload for the SPCB?

When an assessment has been carried out, how will we know that we have done a good job, and covered all the angles? How will we know that it has been successful?

Mike Pringle: It is a constant process; we will monitor continually what is happening with staff and what they are doing. The tool will be launched on 1 December. Monitoring will be key to the process and in order to do it effectively, we have built the tool into existing structures, so that everybody is aware of what is going on and we can assess uptake of the tool, as well as its impact. The equalities team has a role in checking all completed assessments to ensure that they have been completed properly.

Willie Coffey: What would typically happen if you were unhappy with the outcome of the assessment that is carried out?

Aneela McKenna: Do you mean in terms of monitoring how people have assessed the impact?

Willie Coffey: Yes.

Aneela McKenna: One of the good things about our organisation is that we are a small organisation, so we can monitor all impact assessments. Office heads can reject or authorise impact assessments. If the office head is not happy with an assessment, he or she can reject it, and it will go back to the person who is leading on it for it to be revisited. The equalities team will monitor assessments monthly, and will examine every assessment to ensure that it has been carried out properly; it is sometimes easy, in the impact assessment process, to say, "No, there is no impact".

The corporate body is keen for the assessments not to be seen as the main priority. For us, impact assessment should be a secondary process, because the main point is to get the culture right, and then to create a tool that assists staff in thinking about equalities. The process should not be about the change itself.

10:15

Colin Chisholm: I came from the private sector, and have not previously worked in management groups in which equalities has as high a priority as it does here. It is built into almost everything that we do, which is the real test of whether or not it is successful.

Malcolm Chisholm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab): Given the drive to mainstream equal opportunities, what are your views on incorporating the equalities annual report into the Scottish Parliament's annual report?

Mike Pringle: Malcolm Chisholm has raised an interesting point. The UK Government's consultation paper on the specific duty suggests that it is a long-term goal to which organisations should aspire. The SPCB has not yet considered that approach, and has only recently revised its annual equalities report to reflect better the corporate body's organisational priorities by highlighting some of the key equality achievements in parliamentary business—in engagement, supporting members and organisational health. However, it is important that we progress alongside the legislation, and that we work gradually towards mainstreaming the equalities annual report in the future.

Malcolm Chisholm: Will you consider it for next year, or are you talking about something that might only happen a long way down the track?

Mike Pringle: We are considering it, and we would like to try and get involved with next year's annual report. We view it as an important issue, and we want to move forward on it as quickly as possible.

The Convener: Elaine Smith.

Elaine Smith (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab): I do not wish to butt in if Malcolm Chisholm is still pursuing a line of questioning.

Malcolm Chisholm: I have another question, but it is on something else.

Elaine Smith: Thank you. My question is on something specific in this year's annual report. I could have mentioned this in relation to Marlyn Glen's question, too. Aneela McKenna spoke about access arrangements in terms of the new security measures. The annual report mentions improving access to the Parliament's main hall. However, there is an issue with access between the main hall and the rest of the building, particularly for wheelchair users. Are audits done of such things? There is one lift for wheelchair users and others who have access issues from the main hall to the garden lobby. On sitting days, that is the lift that is most used by Government ministers and others, which causes problems. Has that been considered?

Mike Pringle: We are restricted by what is within the building. It is a problem; sadly, nobody considered it before we built the building. How would you change that way of getting people from the garden lobby to other parts of the building? I had a visit from an organisation that brought four people in wheelchairs. It was a nightmare getting people from the public area to the garden lobby. I tried to commandeer the lift and to ensure that we were going up and down together. It is not good.

Elaine Smith: That is the point that I am making. We should audit that. My simple suggestion—although it might cost a fortune—would just be to remove the fancy design at that particular part of the passage through the building and put in some kind of stairlift arrangement, or perhaps a platform lift. It would just be a matter of removing the glass design from that part of the building.

I think that the building might have been monitored prior to the opening, when it was not particularly busy. Practicalities such as use of that lift were not considered or even envisaged. How do such things get monitored in action? What action can be taken to resolve the matter? Is there a budget for such things?

Mike Pringle: Elaine Smith will be aware that budgets are relatively tight at the moment. The SPCB has been criticised for spending money on some security provision, although it will continue to do so, despite the advice that we get from some quarters.

Elaine Smith has made a very good point. Aneela McKenna will consider it, I will raise it within the SPCB and we will see if we can do an

assessment. Aneela has taken a note of your suggestions; it is worth considering them and trying to solve the problem of improving access.

The Convener: The point is well made. When disability groups come to the Parliament, there is a high volume of wheelchair users, which is an on-going practical problem. The committee would be grateful if you could tell us in more detail what exactly is being done to address it.

Mike Pringle: A group that was in just last week—I do not know which group it was—included four people in wheelchairs and eight or nine people in pushchairs. They could not go up and down stairs—all of them had to use the lift. The problem is not limited to people in wheelchairs. In this case, a considerable number of people had to come from the front to the garden lobby. Elaine Smith has made a good point.

Malcolm Chisholm: In a previous report, the committee recommended that members be given training on mainstreaming. We have continued to pursue the issue in correspondence with the Presiding Officer. Page 15 of the report states that the SPCB will in early 2010 explore ways in which it can offer

"training and support to members in their role as employers and service providers".

Can you provide any further information on the equality training that will be offered to members?

Mike Pringle: The Parliament offers training not just in this area but in many different areas. The problem is uptake: members are often reluctant to get involved in training. It is difficult to get them to commit themselves to spend a morning or an afternoon doing training in this and in other areas. Colin Chisholm would like to comment.

Colin Chisholm: The issue will be included in the training needs analysis that the training team is carrying out for members. As Mike Pringle said, we must judge how much training to provide, because uptake has historically not been good.

Malcolm Chisholm: I am not trying to defend members, but knowing what is being offered might encourage them to take it up. The point behind my question is that you can approach the issue from both angles. As you indicate, you may be developing that approach, but it would be useful for members to know exactly what is on offer. That might attract more of them to participate.

Colin Chisholm: We are looking at whether there is a time during the week—perhaps in the early evening, after debates have finished—when it would be easier for members to attend sessions, if we run them.

Aneela McKenna: We want to ensure that we are providing training that members want, and to

explore providing training on equalities issues that will help them to support their constituents. We also want to ensure that members are aware of equality legislation in relation to their role as employers.

Marlyn Glen: Do you also consider the importance of equality training for members as committee members? Last week we held an event on mainstreaming equalities in committees, so it is important that committee members have equalities training.

Aneela McKenna: A few years back, we provided equalities training for clerks, in particular. It would be useful for us to discuss with the committee ways of providing such training in the future.

The Convener: The success of the event that we held on Friday was heavily reliant on members and conveners from each committee being represented. Although the event was scheduled for October, we started to flag it up early, in the summer recess. We reinforced the point that equalities is one of the Parliament's founding principles and we crystallised matters by providing practical examples of fairness issues to which members could relate. If that approach were taken to training, it might help to clarify to members why equalities issues are important and of relevance to them in their day-to-day work as MSPs. That is another point to think about.

Shirley-Anne Somerville (Lothians) (SNP): You have mentioned some of the aspects that you will consider to encourage members to go on training, but we seem still to be in the initial stages in that. Has any work been done to consider what succeeded and failed in past attempts to get members to attend training, in order to ensure that the new options are a success?

Mike Pringle: Training has been offered in the past, but MSPs seem to be extremely busy people. The convener talked about the event on Friday. The committee did extremely well flagging that up early and saying to people that it was important and that they had to come. Maybe Friday is a good day, but we heard earlier that Friday is not a good day for other reasons, so should we then have events on Mondays? The two days on which there is a bit more flexibility are Mondays and Fridays. Historically, there have been opportunities and we have tried to encourage MSPs and their staff to come to training events. Some MSPs are reluctant to allow their staff to go on courses because they feel that the staff should be doing other things. Perhaps the lesson from the event on Friday is that we have to start earlier. However, there has been a problem in the past getting people to come to training. The office has learned from that. Perhaps my colleagues can say how they will try to address the issue in the future.

Colin Chisholm: I am fairly new to the organisation, but I have taken time to meet MSPs and to find out what their needs are. For many of them, the issues arise when they are new MSPs. New MSPs have a different set of needs when they join the Parliament. As Mike Pringle said, attendance at courses has historically been fairly poor. We are considering whether we need to make changes to improve the level of attendance. A member of the training team is carrying out a training needs analysis to establish the areas in which training is required. We are also talking to MSPs to find out whether there is a way in which we can deliver training to achieve better attendance.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Mike Pringle mentioned members' staff—I am keen to explore that issue a bit further. The members are the employers and have obligations to their staff. How do we ensure that members get their staff on to equalities training so that they have the same knowledge and awareness as corporate body staff have?

Mike Pringle: That is a difficulty. As I said, we have run courses and encouraged staff to go on them, but uptake has not been great. I am sure that members will agree that it is their members of staff who have the initial contact with people. Sometimes, a member happens to be in a surgery when somebody turns up, but that is probably slightly rarer than the telephone call from somebody who has a problem. Today, a staff member of mine received a phone call from one of my neighbours asking me to contact them about a racial issue with a next-door neighbour. That came in by e-mail—my member of staff dealt with the call. It is important that members get their staff to go on equalities and other training. However, can we tell 129 MSPs that they have to send their staff members on training courses? Would you like me to tell you that, Shirley-Anne? Well, you would be fine.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I would be good. I would do what you say, Mike.

Mike Pringle: A lot of MSPs would say, "What? A whole morning away from the desk? I would have to answer the e-mails and deal with the phone calls." If you can suggest how we can make MSPs get their staff to go on training days, the SPCB and I would be grateful. It is a question of cajoling them, I think.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I recently went through a recruitment process, which HR assisted with, but there was no mention in that process that I should send my new member of staff on equalities training. He has not started yet, but we have been through the draft contract and got everything arranged and still no one has mentioned equalities training for him during an

induction. That might be put into the process for MSPs, such as me, who are willing to listen—I am sure that there are many more.

10:30

Mike Pringle: I am sure that there are.

The Convener: I hope that you will take that point on board. If you have practical examples to which MSPs can relate—the maternity mentoring scheme was said to be successful—that is a good starting point to interest them.

Elaine Smith: On what Shirley-Anne Somerville said, perhaps induction training needs to be compulsory. Other employers ensure that their staff undertake compulsory induction training.

How much power does the corporate body have over MSPs' time? If you could commandeer chamber time, you could use that time when members are in Edinburgh and should be in the chamber anyway, or training could be put on committee agendas. That was discussed at the event on Friday with committees. How much power does the corporate body have to achieve that?

Mike Pringle: I am not sure how much power the SPCB has. I suspect that we would have to persuade business managers to make such arrangements.

Aneela McKenna: I agree with Mike Pringle. The SPCB's role in influencing the Parliament's work is limited.

Elaine Smith: Is the suggestion worth looking into?

Mike Pringle: I will raise the issue at a corporate body meeting.

Colin Chisholm: When we have talked to MSPs about training on some subjects, some have said that the training would be more acceptable to them if it were provided on a party basis rather than a cross-party basis. That depends a little on the topic—the view might apply not so much to equalities as to other subjects.

The Convener: That is another approach for you to consider. It would be interesting if the corporate body gave a strong steer that such training was good to consider. That might permeate down to business managers and eventually to chamber business or other parliamentary business.

Mike Pringle: I will put the proposal on an SPCB meeting agenda and we will discuss it.

The Convener: That is much appreciated.

Bill Kidd (Glasgow) (SNP): Page 18 contains interesting data—the percentages of staff who fall

under various strands of equal opportunity. More than half the staff—64.5 per cent—are in the age range from 30 to 49. Do you expect such percentages to change, particularly at the lowest and highest ends? I am talking about the numbers of people who are aged about 20 and people who are approaching the current retirement age. It would be interesting to know whether we would like to widen the age range of parliamentary staff. Do you have a view on how the SPCB workforce should match the wider population on strands such as age, race and sexual orientation?

Mike Pringle: One of the Scottish Parliament's successes is its staff. Our staff turnover rate is relatively low. The figures on age are in the report. I am not sure how we would go about changing the age profile and I am not sure whether I would want to do so. The SPCB is open to applications from anybody of any age, from across the spectrum.

The employment criteria are extremely strict. When people apply for jobs, they must meet a narrow spec. To change the profile, we would have to say that we should employ more young people and more old people. I am not sure whether the organisation would want to go down that route. I do not know whether that answers your question.

One of the successes is that, particularly at the moment, staff turnover is extremely low. People join this organisation and they stick about; they hang on to their jobs. Staff retention is extremely good. It is better than almost anywhere else—it is certainly better than it is in many other organisations.

Aneela McKenna: You are absolutely right. We are an ageing organisation, given our staff profile, which we will have to think about for the future. We will have to think about best talent programmes and staff development.

We have been looking at the fact that we do not have staff under the age of 20 in the organisation. We are trying to figure out the best way to engage with young people to come and work for us. We considering whether placements and apprenticeships are possible ways to encourage young people to come and work in the Parliament.

Bill Kidd: That is very positive. Thank you.

The Convener: Does Colin Chisholm want to comment, given that it will be about raising awareness, in a number of different sectors, of what is available in the Parliament?

Colin Chisholm: By coincidence, this was discussed at yesterday's operational management group.

Mike Pringle: I did not know that.

Colin Chisholm: We are challenging ourselves in relation to the selection criteria. There is a demand to work at the Parliament—there are more people who want to work here than there are vacancies, because we have a relatively low staff turnover. We are in the process of considering whether the process that we have in place makes it more difficult for people under the age of 20 to join the Parliament. The human resources team has been asked to consider that and report back to the OMG. We are challenging ourselves by asking whether we are doing something that makes it more difficult for people under 20 to join the Parliament. We are in the initial stages of deciding where we sit in that regard. As Aneela McKenna said, we have an ageing staff profile, so, in the interest of balance, we would like to see more younger staff.

The Convener: Would you just be looking at younger people? Given the number of people who are facing redundancy and have a wealth of experience to bring to any job, are you considering older people, too?

Colin Chisholm: Yes, certainly. The process that we have to go through has to be extremely fair. I was not used to using the term “competition” before I joined the Parliament, but every vacancy that we advertise externally goes through a very competitive process to ensure fairness.

The Convener: Would you be looking particularly at targeting people who have been facing redundancy and are now retraining or who are looking to change direction? There is a wealth of experience out there as well as a lot of younger people.

Colin Chisholm: If, for whatever reason, we were ever to carry out a large volume of recruitment, that is certainly an avenue that we would consider. As Mike Pringle said, our staff turnover tends to be very low, so we are not in the process of carrying out regular, high-volume recruitment.

Bill Kidd: Is it a failure in data collection that 8.5 per cent of the staff do not bother, it appears, to register their ethnicity? Is that because it is left entirely to staff to choose whether to register it, or is it because the data have not been collected sufficiently well?

Mike Pringle: When people are recruited, they are encouraged to let us know whether they have any disability and so on. Disability is a good example, because, as a result of the organisation being quite proactive, we now have a better idea of the range of people in the organisation who have a disability, and of what disability they have. Previously, they might not have wanted to say that they had a disability. Staff are encouraged—in much the same way as MSPs—to register these

things but, when someone joins the organisation, we cannot say, “You must tell us everything there is to know about you.” If they want to tell us, they will tell us, but some people do not like telling us. Gradually, as people start working in the organisation, information might come out. They are encouraged to let us know so that we are more aware of the profile of the organisation.

Aneela McKenna: The issue is that people should have a choice. Some people will want to identify themselves as being from a black and minority ethnic background and some people will not. That is the reason for the percentage of staff who do not register their ethnicity. Because during the recruitment phase people might not want to say something that might put them at a disadvantage, we have carried out further monitoring of disability, which has led to an increase in the number of staff telling us that they are disabled. We will certainly look into carrying out the same sort of monitoring with ethnicity in the future to check whether anything different might be emerging.

Bill Kidd: The equalities staff audit was conducted during the summer through a questionnaire that was distributed to all Scottish Parliament staff. In previous years, the committee has examined the audit’s findings in an evidence session with the SPCB, but we have not been able to do so with this audit because it has not yet been published. When might it be published and why has it been held up?

Aneela McKenna: The staff audit is due to come out in November and will go to the SPCB in January. I also point out that the audit is carried out only every two years, which is probably why this time it is not fitting in with various timescales. *[Interruption.]*

Bill Kidd: That seems perfectly reasonable. I was just looking round to see whether everyone else agreed.

The report says that one of the organisation’s main equality achievements was the support given by the non-Executive bills unit to Jackie Baillie’s Disabled Persons Parking (Scotland) Bill. Surely, as SPCB employees are expected to remain impartial in the provision of services, they would not be fulfilling their role if they did not also provide support to MSPs who were seeking to introduce legislation that did not adhere to the equalities duty. Given that such support would have to be given in any case, why has NEBU’s support for Jackie Baillie’s bill been highlighted as an equalities achievement?

Mike Pringle: That is an interesting point. I am sure that Aneela McKenna will wish to comment, but the organisation might have felt the point worth highlighting because the bill had come through this

particular process and was on the issue of equalities. Perhaps I should declare a vested interest in disabled parking bays; indeed, I wish that I had thought of the proposal and I certainly encouraged Jackie Baillie to get on with it. I remember the frustration that I used to feel when, on trying to park in a disabled parking bay, I discovered that the car that is already parked there did not have a disabled sticker.

Aneela McKenna: Mike Pringle is right. We included the issue in the report because we wanted to highlight the work that the Parliament did on that successful piece of legislation. After all, it very much fits in with our strategic priorities for parliamentary business and promoting equalities.

Bill Kidd: I am sure that the committee is very grateful for the support that was given to the bill.

The Convener: I think that we felt a little bit of disquiet that the issue was flagged up in the way that it was, given the policy and the fact that the bill itself was a member's bill. Perhaps you should look again at how the matter was reported. After all, if you take the bit about the bill out of the report, the report itself begins to look weaker. I think that that might be a bit of a concern.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Just to follow on from the point made by Bill Kidd, I spoke at a meeting of the Public Petitions Committee in favour of the same-sex marriage petition that is mentioned in the report. Obviously, as one of the sponsoring MSPs, I think that that petition is worth while, but another petition seeking a ban on civil partnerships might come before that committee and I would not want the Parliament to be seen as failing in its equalities duty simply because a member of the public is upholding their right to submit a petition. I see what you are saying about the Disabled Persons Parking (Scotland) Bill, but I am not sure why the petitions, for example, have been mentioned.

10:45

Mike Pringle: It is a fair point. The department will take every opportunity to highlight things that it thinks are good practice. I was not entirely aware of that petition, but if the department feels that there is something going on in the Parliament that it wants to highlight as good practice involving equalities, we should be doing that.

Elaine Smith: Although the committee agrees with what Aneela McKenna said about the need to highlight good practice, I do not think that it fits in with the report. We could take the example of the Breastfeeding (Scotland) Bill. NEBU told me that I could not introduce that bill—that it was not a bill for Scotland because we did not have power in that area at the time. I can partly see why it thought that it was simply an equalities issue that

should be handled by Westminster but, as we all know, I managed to get the bill passed. Should the report also highlight the fact that NEBU gave advice that such a bill could not be introduced in Scotland?

Although I agree that the issue of disabled persons' parking places is a good one, if we are going to start highlighting such examples, then, as Shirley-Anne Somerville flagged up, where do we stop? The Disabled Persons Parking (Scotland) Bill deals with a very obvious equalities issue, but there may be other bills that NEBU has helped with that have assisted with equalities or equal opportunities. There is then the question whether we recognise just the work of individual members or whether we start to look at what the Parliament itself is doing. When a bill is passed by the Parliament, it is a piece of parliamentary legislation even though the Government might have introduced it. Are we going to start flagging that up?

Although it is good to record credit for such things in the report, it may not be technically correct.

Mike Pringle: We will take on board the comments that are made about this year's report and reflect on them. We will perhaps revise what we do next year.

The Convener: We would be grateful for some consistency and some analysis of the rationale behind why some things are flagged up while others are not.

Willie Coffey: Let us turn briefly to the Scottish Parliament's website. What level of engagement was there with disability groups in the development of the website? I mean not just sight-impaired groups who wanted to use the website but those with a reading disability such as dyslexia. Can you tell us a wee bit about that?

Mike Pringle: The SPCB would say that the website must be accessible to everybody, including anybody with any sort of disability. It is reassuring to hear that accessibility is being included as one of the key areas for improvement. I do not think that any of us needs to be told about information technology in the Parliament—we all have our criticisms of the IT, although I hope that things are improving and will continue to improve over the years.

There has been a lot of feedback from disabled groups about the website, which has helped us to identify the main issues relating to the site. Disabled people were consulted at the outset of the project and they will have another opportunity to assist with the testing of any new developments. We are constantly talking to disabled groups. The project team is working hard towards achieving the double A web accessibility

standard, with a drive towards achieving the triple A web accessibility standard wherever that is possible. We are doing what we can.

I am sure that people with dyslexia have been included in the consultation. If any member has heard from a group that has had difficulty in accessing the Scottish Parliament website, it would be good to hear about that. We could talk to that group or individual and ask about the problem that they encountered in accessing the website. The more people we talk to, the quicker we will get to the double or triple A standard, although I have to say that constituents sometimes tell me that they cannot find anything on the ordinary Parliament website. It is a difficult balance. However, if you know of anybody, please let us know. We will be more than happy to talk to them and ask what their problems are.

Willie Coffey: Navigation of websites is always a challenge, no matter what the user's abilities are. It is important to be careful about navigation during the design process. However, I was thinking more specifically about readability. I do not want to throw more tools at you, but there are tools that measure readability, which could help to ensure that the language that is used on the Parliament's website is accessible to a wide range of people in Scotland, including people of all ages. If that has not been taken into account so far, could it be considered in future so that the language that is used is easy to understand?

Mike Pringle: I ask Aneela McKenna to comment on that.

Aneela McKenna: You are right. We want to ensure that we are covering all types of disabilities in terms of how the web is updated, and one of the things that we will ensure is readability. I know that that has been built into the web programme, so you can be reassured about that.

The Convener: That completes our questioning. Is there anything else that the witnesses would like to add?

Mike Pringle: No.

The Convener: A lot of points were raised during the session. We look forward to being advised on the various points on which we perhaps did not get the fullest answers. Thank you very much for attending this morning.

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

10:51

Meeting continued in private until 12:48.

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