

HEALTH AND SPORT COMMITTEE

Wednesday 27 February 2008

Session 3

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HEALTH AND SPORT COMMITTEE

6th Meeting 2008, Session 3

CONVENER

*Christine Grahame (South of Scotland) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Ross Finnie (West of Scotland) (LD)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Helen Eadie (Dunfermline East) (Lab)

*Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)

*Michael Matheson (Falkirk West) (SNP)

*Ian McKee (Lothians) (SNP)

*Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

*Dr Richard Simpson (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)

COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTES

Joe FitzPatrick (Dundee West) (SNP)

Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

Irene Oldfather (Cunninghame South) (Lab)

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING GAVE EVIDENCE:

Rhona Martin MBE

Neil Rennick (Scottish Government Primary and Community Care Directorate)

John Stirling (Scottish Government Primary and Community Care Directorate)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Tracey White

SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

Douglas Thornton

ASSISTANT CLERK

Emma Berry

LOCATION

Committee Room 1

Scottish Parliament

Health and Sport Committee

Wednesday 27 February 2008

[THE CONVENER opened the meeting at 10:10]

Subordinate Legislation

National Assistance (Assessment of Resources) Amendment (Scotland) Regulations 2008 (SSI 2008/13)

National Assistance (Sums for Personal Requirements) (Scotland) Regulations 2008 (SSI 2008/14)

The Convener (Christine Grahame): Good morning. I welcome everyone to the sixth meeting of the Health and Sport Committee in 2008. I remind all members to switch off their mobile phones.

Agenda item 1 is subordinate legislation. We have before us two negative Scottish statutory instruments for consideration. SSI 2008/13 amends the National Assistance (Assessment of Resources) Regulations 1992 (SI 1992/2977), which are concerned with the assessment of a person's liability to pay for accommodation that is provided under the Social Work (Scotland) Act 1968. SSI 2008/14 prescribes that, from 7 April 2008, the sum that a local authority must assume that an individual needs for personal requirements, when assessing liability to pay for accommodation that is provided under the Mental Health (Care and Treatment) (Scotland) Act 2003, be increased from £20.45 to £21.15.

The committee has received correspondence from Age Concern Scotland in respect of SSI 2008/14. That correspondence is reproduced in the updated subordinate legislation briefing, together with information about a related petition that is currently under consideration by the Public Petitions Committee. The updated briefing has been circulated to all members.

I welcome to the committee the Scottish Government officials Neil Rennick, who is the head of the older people's unit, and John Stirling, who is a policy officer. Do members have any comments or questions for the officials about the instruments?

Dr Richard Simpson (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): What is the process in Scotland for upgrading the personal allowances element? There is a devolved power in Scotland and we

have the opportunity to take a different view. I presume that the recommended uplift is just that—a recommendation that has been made by the “Charging for Residential Accommodation Guide” stakeholder group in England and accepted by the United Kingdom Government. First, is that the case? Secondly, what process of independent assessment have you carried out in relation to the needs of people in Scotland?

Neil Rennick (Scottish Government Primary and Community Care Directorate): The stakeholder group that has been examining the whole of the charging system has not yet reported on its findings. The uprate that is proposed for the coming year is an inflationary uplift similar to the uplifts that have been made in previous years. It is based on a Department for Work and Pensions assessment of personal expenses needs that has been uprated over recent years.

There has been no recent separate review in Scotland of the personal expenses allowance, although we have been aware of and involved with the stakeholder group that has been examining the issue in the UK. We expect that group to report shortly and we will draw on its conclusions in considering how to move forward in Scotland.

Dr Simpson: Are we represented on that group or have we submitted evidence to it? If so, what is that evidence based on? Has any work been done on the particular needs that may pertain in Scotland?

Neil Rennick: We sit on the group as observers rather than as members. Although we have submitted information and advice on wider charging issues that are relevant specifically to Scotland, we have not submitted any separate advice on the personal expenses allowance. No specific analysis has been undertaken of the circumstances of the personal expenses allowance in Scotland, but we are aware that Age Concern England and Help the Aged, which are represented on the group, have made recommendations on the issue. That will be reflected in the group's final report.

Dr Simpson: Can you give us a date for the publication of that report? Do you have any idea when the group will conclude?

John Stirling (Scottish Government Primary and Community Care Directorate): It will be sometime in the next two to three months.

The Convener: You have mentioned two organisations that sit on the stakeholder group. What are the others?

Neil Rennick: I have mentioned Help the Aged and Age Concern. There is also a representative from an organisation for residents of care homes and their relatives, and there are representatives

from English local authorities and from the Department of Health. As I say, representatives from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland also sit on the group as observers.

10:15

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con):

That was very helpful, and was very much along our lines of questioning. I want to ask about two things. I had been thinking that we needed to review the situation, but it is quite obvious that that is being done by the stakeholder group. Should the stakeholder group recommend in two to three months' time that the proposed personal expenses allowance of £21.15 per week needs to be uplifted, what would the process be? Would you then recommend a change to the provisions of the statutory instrument?

Neil Rennick: The stakeholder group is not just considering the personal expenses allowance; it is looking at the residential care charging rules much more widely. We expect that further consultation will be undertaken in England with a wider set of stakeholders, taking forward the recommendations of the stakeholder group. We will consider the circumstances in Scotland and engage with relevant organisations, including Age Concern Scotland, and we will work out what the best, separate approach is for Scotland.

Mary Scanlon: That is helpful. On a procedural point, once we have passed the regulations today, how flexible are things? Could we return to the matter in six months' or a year's time, following the response of the stakeholder group?

Michael Matheson (Falkirk West) (SNP): I would like some clarification on the stakeholder group. You mentioned that you have observer status on it. Is there a similar stakeholder group in Scotland, of which you are a full member?

Neil Rennick: No, there is not, but the care charging rules are very similar in England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland, because they operate in a way that partly links up with the benefits system. That is why it was decided that it would not be appropriate to have a separate stakeholder group in Scotland. With respect to any recommendations that come out of the group, we still have our own separate regulations and guidance, which we will draw on when we think about how to progress separately in Scotland. To reiterate, there is not a separate stakeholder group in Scotland because of the close links between the four countries in the UK.

Michael Matheson: Am I correct in saying that Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland are all observers on the stakeholder group?

Neil Rennick: Yes.

Michael Matheson: I presume that the Department of Health is a member of the stakeholder group.

John Stirling: The Department of Health has led the stakeholder group. The recommendations from the stakeholder group will be directly reported to that department's ministers.

Michael Matheson: The department is a member of the stakeholder group, then.

Neil Rennick: It is the secretariat.

Michael Matheson: Right—it is the secretariat; it is a member. Why do you have only observer status on the group?

Neil Rennick: The group is examining the care charging rules in England. We have separate care charging rules here. All that we are doing is drawing on the experience and discussions of the stakeholder group; we will have our own discussions with our own stakeholders.

The Convener: You will have your discussions afterwards.

Neil Rennick: Yes.

Michael Matheson: I am still a bit confused about the idea of observer status and the fact that the Department of Health has member status on the stakeholder group while also providing its secretariat. Why would you not have a similar stakeholder group in Scotland, given that we have our own charging regulations?

Neil Rennick: There are consultations on care charging and any changes to the care charging regulations. There was a recognition that the care charging rules are extremely complicated. The Department of Health initiated a review of the rules in England. Rather than setting up a separate structure to review the rules in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, we have sat on the stakeholder group with observer status, given the clear overlap between the different structures. We will then draw on the group's conclusions and have a dialogue with our own stakeholders.

Michael Matheson: Is the stakeholder group time limited?

John Stirling: The stakeholder group is time limited to the extent that it has been operating for 18 months now and, when it comes to its conclusions and makes recommendations, it will come to an end.

Michael Matheson: That was helpful.

The Convener: I have just checked my arithmetic with the estimable Ross Finnie. The Executive note says that

"Increasing the Personal Expenses Allowance from £20.45 to £21.15 per week will cost approximately £1.1 million for 2008-09",

but the Age Concern Scotland paper says that

"Approximately 29,400 care home residents receive this benefit".

If residents get an increase of only 70p and we multiply that by 30,000, we get £21,000—

Ross Finnie (West of Scotland) (LD): A week.

The Convener: Ah! I knew I was no good at arithmetic.

Dr Simpson: You did not consult widely enough.

The Convener: I did not. I should have asked a supplementary of Ross Finnie.

Ross Finnie: I answered the question that I was asked.

The Convener: You are blameless. I should have asked a supplementary or put the question with more clarity. So the figures in the paper are right. Is 29,400 about right for the number of care home residents?

Neil Rennick: That is the number of care home residents who are—

The Convener: Eligible. I am watching my words now. That was my first bloomer of the day; I am sure that there will be others.

Helen Eadie (Dunfermline East) (Lab): I think that you said that the stakeholder group has been meeting for about 18 months.

John Stirling: Yes.

Helen Eadie: What has been the frequency of those meetings?

John Stirling: The stakeholder group has met relatively infrequently. It had its first meeting in August 2006, met again in December 2006 and June 2007, and is looking to have a further meeting to conclude its consideration.

Helen Eadie: So it has not met since last June.

John Stirling: That is right.

Helen Eadie: What consideration have you given with your own stakeholder group to the possibility of Scotland setting its own rate? Why has that idea not been progressed?

John Stirling: Along with others from Northern Ireland and Wales as observers on the stakeholder group, we have an input into the consideration of the residential care charging rules. When the stakeholder group makes its recommendations, Department of Health officials will put them to their ministers and we will consult the Scottish ministers. We will also consult a wide group of stakeholders in Scotland to decide what needs to be done as far as Scottish interests are concerned.

Helen Eadie: By the time the stakeholder group comes to a conclusion, almost a year will have elapsed since it last met last June. Obviously, further deliberations will then have to be had. In the meantime, pensioners in care homes will have had only the inflationary increase. Given the time that the Government—whether at UK or Scottish level—is taking on all of this, pensioners will get little benefit from the review. The message from care home residents is that the Government is not treating the situation with urgency. When you attend the meeting in London, will you address that issue? Furthermore, will you discuss it with Scottish ministers? People in the community have told me of the urgency of the situation. It is unfair for care home residents to be left in this way.

Neil Rennick: Part of the reason for awaiting the outcome of the stakeholder group and part of the advantage in being involved in the process is that issues such as the personal expenses allowance are being considered within the wider context of the entire charging rules. Clearly, in considering the adjustment of any one element of the charging rules, it is important to assess the impact that that would have on the other elements. It is also important to assess the alternatives that could be delivered.

In general, the charging rules are updated annually. There are opportunities every year to look again at the rules. Clearly, given the number of people who are involved, any change has fairly big implications. It therefore seems sensible to ensure that we take the time to look at which approach is the right one. As I said, we have an opportunity to uprate annually. Also—and in answer to your earlier question—if it is thought that something needs to be done more urgently, we have the scope to bring forward regulations more quickly.

Ross Finnie: Given that the allowance has an interchange involving pension receipt, adjustments made under the regulations to what the individual retains, in this case for personal expenditure, are predicated on a pension payment that I assume is operated through the DWP. We have the power to make separate regulations, but if the scheme is effectively run on a national basis through the DWP—that is the big "if"—how in Scotland do we have the power to change the amount?

Neil Rennick: The regulations cover only the care charging rules and the amount that a local authority will charge someone or ask them to contribute towards to the cost of their care in a residential home when that is funded by the local authority. In calculating how much someone contributes, the local authority will take account of their pension and any income that they receive from other sources, and it will ensure that any capital that the person has above the capital limits

covered in the assessment of resources regulations is left to them. It will also ensure that the person is left with the allowance for personal expenses. It is an element not of the pension system but of the local authority care charging rules.

Ross Finnie: So who bears the cost?

Neil Rennick: The local authority bears the cost, although in practical terms the regulations are cost neutral for local authorities because of the contributions that people make from their other income. As people have more income, the local authority receives more money through charging and can afford to give people more money in the personal expenses allowance. So it is the local authority that pays the money, but the regulations are cost neutral in terms of the inflationary uplift.

The Convener: The issues are complex—and I have already shown the difficulty that I have with arithmetic. Would it assist the committee to have a paper from the Scottish Parliament information centre to explain all the interactions involved, rather than trying to tease them out in questions? It is becoming a tangle for me. Would that be useful for the committee?

Ross Finnie: Yes, it would. For example, on the previous question, Age Concern is concerned about the people at the lowest income levels, who are in effect those on state pension. It is difficult to see where the private sector comes into that.

The Convener: I suggest that we show the *Official Report* of this question session to SPICe so that it can see the issues that we have raised and assist us.

I should also tell the committee that the petition that is in train has not yet come before the Public Petitions Committee. It will certainly be referred to the minister and perhaps to us. I suggest that, once we have completed this session and indicated to SPICe that we would like some clarification about the interaction of the assessments with the various charges, income, capital and so on, we wait to see what happens to the petition.

Ian McKee (Lothians) (SNP): Will the officials clarify exactly how many observers from the Scottish Government there are at stakeholder group meetings and their rank or status in the Government? What does observer status mean? Does it mean literally that they observe and do not take any part in the meeting, or can they take part but not vote? What is the difference between an observer and a member of the group?

John Stirling: I am a Scottish Government observer on the group, and I am a policy officer in the community care division of the primary and community care directorate. When I go to the

meetings of the stakeholder group, I actively participate in the meetings. We discuss all different aspects of the care charging rules. However, when the stakeholder group reaches its final conclusions, I will not be party to or bound by its recommendations because I am an official of the Scottish Government. The stakeholder group will make recommendations to the Department of Health ministers, and the other observers from Northern Ireland and Wales and I will then report back to our respective ministers.

10:30

Ian McKee: What sort of input from Scotland is there in those meetings? When an item comes up, do you just deal with things as you see fit?

John Stirling: The residential care charging rules have been fairly extensively considered. The stakeholder group's purpose is to consider the guidance, which has existed for many years. We are conducting a root-and-branch review of all the different aspects of that guidance. My colleagues from Wales, Northern Ireland and England and I—from a Scottish Government perspective—have been able to inform the stakeholder group about the issues that need clarification. The stakeholder group will have its own thoughts on how the guidance should be changed. One issue that it has considered is the personal expenses allowance. That consideration has been based on information that has been provided, particularly by Age Concern England and Help the Aged in England.

Ian McKee: So there is little difference between being an observer and being a member of the group.

The Convener: The point is that an observer is not bound by the report. That is a serious point.

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): I think that the Scottish Parliament information centre could deal with this question. I want to find out about the things that are not covered by the allowance which should be provided to people in homes. I would like to have an idea of what the allowance should cover and what should be provided to people, so that we have a clear idea as to whether the approach that has been taken is practical.

The Convener: That seems to be a very practical idea.

The Subordinate Legislation Committee made no comments on the instrument. In the light of our discussion, the fact that we will receive information from SPICe on the interactions that are involved, the possibility that petition PE1125 will come to us, and the possibility that in two to three months, there may be an analysis to guide us—it will not be binding—on how to reassess the allowances,

do members agree that we do not wish to make any recommendation on the instruments?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: Thank you very much.

Pathways into Sport Inquiry

10:33

The Convener: Agenda item 2 is our pathways into sport inquiry. I am pleased to welcome Rhona Martin, who is the first in a series of successful sportspeople who will give evidence to the committee during the first phase of the inquiry. She has had some journey this morning. Perhaps she would have come faster if she had travelled on an ice rink. As members know, Rhona is a previous winner of the Scottish curling championships and she was skip of the Olympic gold medal-winning Great Britain curling team in 2002. She has agreed to make a short presentation to the committee before she answers members' questions. The floor is hers.

Rhona Martin MBE: I will give a brief history of my curling career.

I did not start curling until I was 17, so I was quite a late starter. I was leaving school and wanted to try something new. My brother played the sport, which is why I tried it. I spent a few years in the juniors—the under-21s—travelled around Scotland and enjoyed the sport, which is a good, social sport. I met loads of people and got to travel a lot, which is what I was looking for in a hobby.

It was then decided that curling would be an Olympic medal sport. I had been at world junior and European championships, but there was no intense training, back-up or support then. As soon as it was decided that curling would be an Olympic medal sport, the Scottish Institute of Sport made it a core sport. It was great to get all the services that the institute provided, such as psychology, video analysis and nutrition services—areas that we had never touched on before when we played the sport. Through sportscotland, we received lottery funding, thankfully, which allowed us to travel abroad to competitions and gain more experience. We did that for many years.

The first year in which curling was an Olympic medal sport was 1998. We lost the final in that year, which was not good, so we decided that we would train as a team over the next four years and give it our all in 2002. We got to Salt Lake City in that year and got a great result. Then the selection system in Britain changed for the Turin Olympics. Thankfully, I was selected to go there. We did not get such a good result, but the profile of curling was certainly raised a great deal through television coverage. It is a minority sport that did not get a lot of coverage, so for us that was great. People were made aware of what curling was about, especially in England, where they did not know about it.

I retired from competitive curling last year, having curled competitively for Scotland for 22

years. I decided to call it a day and am now in coaching. I am currently employed by UK Sport for 50 per cent of my time, on its elite coach programme, and by the Royal Caledonian Curling Club, the sport's governing body, for the other 50 per cent, helping to coach elite athletes in this country. I have been doing that for the past year.

That is a brief outline of my curling career.

The Convener: Thank you. Committee members will now ask questions.

Helen Eadie: We are very pleased and privileged to have the chance to quiz you today about your experiences. It is especially nice to have you here because one of your team members, Debbie Knox from Lochgelly, is a constituent of mine.

The Convener: I knew that you would get Fife in, Helen.

Helen Eadie: You could depend on it, convener.

What barriers are faced by athletes who are trying to get into competitive sport? It would be good if you could relate your answer to your own experiences.

Rhona Martin: In competitive sports, to play at the higher level or even just participate, the main barrier that we face is the lack of access to facilities. Curling has a season of nine months maximum—it is usually eight months—so we have to share facilities with skating and ice hockey. At some facilities, there are only three days of curling a week. We do not always have access to facilities, and the number of facilities is not great. Trying to encourage school children and bussing them to the facilities is a problem when there are no facilities close to them. The lack of facilities is definitely a barrier to encouraging more people into the sport because a lot of travelling is involved.

Helen Eadie: I guess that one of the issues is finance and people's ability to access finance. How were you able to overcome that when you got all the way to Salt Lake City? Right from the early days, there must have been issues with finance for everything that you have spoken about. As you gradually climbed the ladder, how did you overcome the financial barriers?

Rhona Martin: I was lucky because I had my parents' support when I was young. We held a lot of fundraising events—bag packing in supermarkets, and so on—for our team, so that we could go abroad and enter competitions to gain experience. We felt that that was very important. Lottery funding was a big help to us because it helped to cover the costs of our sport. Now, a pathway exists for elite-level athletes to progress even further.

Helen Eadie: If you could wave a magic wand and wish for something to change about the way in which we organise competitive sports, what would it be?

Rhona Martin: There would probably be quite a few things that I would change. Aside from facilities, coaching is our big problem—95 per cent of the coaches in our sport are volunteers. We need full-time coaches at ice rinks around the country to do the job day in, day out. That would give people like me, who have been involved in the sport, an opportunity to give something back to the sport and to progress on the coaching side as well.

Mary Scanlon: Having started the sport at 17 because your brother was a curler and you wanted something different, you have turned out to be a great asset to the country. From what you said, things have changed significantly over the past 22 years, in that curling is now an Olympic sport that attracts TV coverage, and elite curlers now get a lot of back-up.

How do we get people into sports such as curling? What could or should be done in schools to get young people—even younger than 17—interested in curling? Do we need more facilities to encourage people to try the sport to see whether they like it? As a representative—as Rhoda Grant is—of the Highlands and Islands, I think that it might be more difficult for someone to achieve their ambitions to be a curler if they live in north-west Sutherland. How do you get young people in schools to sample the sport?

Rhona Martin: After the Salt Lake City winter Olympics, a company produced an indoor curling set with stones that run on castors to a target. For the past five years, I have taken a set into schools to give pupils an idea of the sport and to encourage them to try curling. We run a curling school programme over a six-week block that allows primary 7 pupils to try the sport. One barrier we face is that schools may not have transport to get to facilities. Many other sports can be taken into schools but, for curling, people need to travel to the ice rink. This year, about 6,000 primary 7 schoolchildren have been through our curling school programme. After the programme, pupils who want to get involved in the sport can move on to after-school clubs or join junior clubs. However, as I said, we do not have enough coaches at ice rinks to move on as fast as we would like.

Mary Scanlon: So a structure is in place. Is that funded by sportscotland or the Scottish Institute of Sport?

Rhona Martin: Our governing body and sportscotland have development officers in place. The development officers around the country try to get primary 7 schoolchildren into our programme.

The development officers also deal with senior schools, as we are also trying to encourage older pupils to take up the sport.

Mary Scanlon: Are youngsters enthusiastic about curling—as opposed to other sports—once it has been shown to them?

Rhona Martin: Absolutely—they love it. They think it looks easy but then they fall over on the ice when they come in. They think it is fun and they really enjoy it because it is completely different. Many youngsters have never previously had the chance to try it out.

The Convener: The geographical issue that Mary Scanlon mentioned affects many of our constituencies. Are the schools that you have visited scattered across Scotland or are they all in the central belt?

Rhona Martin: We have visited schools throughout Scotland. The development officers whom the governing body has put in place are spread throughout the country, from the Highlands and Islands down to Lockerbie and Dumfries. We try to involve schools from across the country, but transport can be a problem, especially for schools in rural areas.

The Convener: How do schools apply for the curling school programme? How do they find out about it? I had never heard of the programme.

Rhona Martin: The curling school programme has been running for a long time—even before we went to Salt Lake City. When I was involved in the programme for a year in Ayrshire, we persuaded the schools to change from a six-week swimming block to three weeks of swimming and three weeks of curling. The pupils loved it.

We need coaches in ice rinks who can constantly target schools to get them involved. The barrier that we face is that, if headteachers cannot afford to pay for transport from their school's budget, the schools will not get involved.

Dr Simpson: I am very interested in what you are saying. I am also interested in how people progress from being participants who just enjoy the sport to becoming elite players. What is the career path for such individuals? Do you, as someone who has retired from competitive sport but is still coaching, think that we have it right at the moment? For example, from the 6,000 pupils on the curling school programme, are you able to select youngsters who might continue with curling? Is there a process by which those who show aptitude are encouraged so that we can form a group of potentially competitive elite sportsmen? Are they given the support, encouragement, finance—and space, if they are working—that they need? What are the arrangements, and are they appropriate?

10:45

Rhona Martin: There is a good structure in place. To qualify for the regional academies, which gets them extra coaching, youngsters do not need to have won anything. They just need to have been at competitions and to have been seen. I have been working with the regional academy in Ayrshire for the past year. Youngsters can then progress to the national academy. At that level, we bring in the psychology, video analysis and advice on nutrition. That is before they get to the Scottish Institute of Sport level.

When I came through, there was nothing for youngsters, but we now have a good structure and youngsters are given information, help and coaching. The pathway definitely exists to enable people to reach the Scottish Institute of Sport level and to get help and support at the elite level.

Dr Simpson: Do people get funding to go to the national academy?

Rhona Martin: Yes. We have a certain number of squad weekends a year with the national academy, on and off the ice, and we fund people to go abroad to get more experience in Canada. They get a couple of trips a year.

We have eight teams in the national academy. At the moment, a good number of youngsters are coming through, and below that we have the regional academies throughout the country, from the Highlands to Dumfries and Galloway.

Dr Simpson: It certainly sounds as if progress is being made.

When people progress into elite sport and then retire from active competition, they often want to give something back. What career advice is available to them? People might not make the top grade, but they might want to become coaches or whatever. Are there adequate opportunities for individuals to progress in some way within the sport, even if not to the elite level? Alternatively, people at the elite level might be injured or might retire from active sport. What advice do people get about that? What advice did you get?

Rhona Martin: At the Scottish Institute of Sport we have performance lifestyle advisers, who work with all the athletes who have been competing and help them. While athletes are competing, the lifestyle advisers can speak to schools and colleges to help them get time off for world championships and things like that. They help the youngsters to plan their schedules, because a lot of them struggle to commit to the sport as well as to their studies. That is a big help to them.

I spent quite a lot of time with the advisers. Having had children and then committed 100 per cent to curling, I had not worked for 18 years, so it was difficult for me to get back into work. I did

hotel catering at college, but that was sidelined because such work involves weekend work and I wanted to curl, so I did not have much experience. I wanted to put something back into the sport and, thankfully, the opportunity to do so came up. The advisers are there to help and advise and they have contacts everywhere, so they are a big help to the athletes.

Dr Simpson: I presume that the national academy is a virtual academy. Is that correct, or is there a centre?

Rhona Martin: There is no centre. We have been trying to get a centre of excellence for curling built in Scotland, but it has not happened yet. Such a national centre would be great. Because the people in the national academy come from throughout the country, we tend to have one event down in Ayrshire and one up north. We try to spread them around. However, the regional academies and the national academy weekly coaching are all done in local ice rinks.

Dr Simpson: I wanted to give you an opportunity to put that on the record, because in the preparations for the 2012 Olympics, there is the potential to develop specialist regional centres for each sport at United Kingdom level. I am surprised that we do not have a centre of excellence for curling. What have been the barriers to that? Are there firm proposals that are just awaiting funding?

Rhona Martin: No, I think the funding was there. Land was looked for and it was thought that it had been obtained, but that turned out not to be the case. I have not heard the most recent update. Perhaps someone else will know what is happening; I do not. The plans were all in place. A national centre of excellence would be great for our sport because it would mean that all the equipment would be in one place and we could just bring people in.

The Convener: Michael Matheson might be able to enlighten us.

Michael Matheson: I understand that the centre of excellence is meant to be in Stirling. I think that there is an issue to do with the national and regional sports facilities strategy, which is about the local authority coming up with its share of the money to make the centre happen. Local authority funding has been an issue with quite a few of the facilities that are associated with the strategy. I understand that that was a problem in this case, although I do not know whether the situation has changed.

I will pick up on the curling school programme, which between 6,000 and 7,000 kids have gone through this year. Does it work effectively as a conversion programme? In other words, once kids have done the programme for six weeks or

however long it lasts, do they go on to take up the sport? Can you give us an idea of how many kids might go into the sport after trying out the programme?

Rhona Martin: Quite a few kids come into the sport through the programme, but the problem is keeping them involved. We do not have enough coaches at ice rinks to run effective programmes. Many youngsters come to after-school clubs, and are then filtered through to the junior clubs at each ice rink. Young people are coming through into the sport, but not nearly as many as we would like.

We do skill awards with the school kids to give them motivation. They are interested in the sport and they want to keep going with it, but the problem is where they go to curl. If they cannot travel however many miles it is to the nearest ice rink after school, they will not be able to participate.

Michael Matheson: You mentioned a shortage of coaching staff. Is it a question of having enough part-time or full-time coaches at curling facilities to bring on children who decide to continue with the sport?

Rhona Martin: Absolutely. The governing body employs some development officers, but each ice rink needs someone who can coach full time or part time. A handful of us coach the elite-level athletes, but we need to nurture kids at the level below that who are the future of the sport. The annoying thing is that they are all keen to get involved—they are desperate to take it up.

As I said, curling is a great social sport. The youngest member of my club is 12 and the oldest is 80. The fact that people from a wide age range play together means that it is a great social sport for kids to be involved in, but we cannot seem to hold on to them.

Michael Matheson: That is helpful.

You mentioned the benefit that lottery funding provided in allowing you to compete on the international stage. You will no doubt be aware of concerns about the reduction in the amount of lottery funding that will go to sport. To what extent did competing at international level help to make you an Olympic champion? If you had not competed internationally, would you have been able to get up to that level?

Rhona Martin: Definitely not. People have to be put in pressure situations. A person can practise all they like at a sport, but they will not find out how they might deal with a pressure situation until they have been put in one. It is also necessary to be able to deal with crowds. Until you experience 10,000 Canadians cheering you or booing you, you cannot legislate for how you will react.

The psychology work was new to us—we were a bit wary of it at first, because we had curled for

many years without a psychologist—but it definitely helped us. It is one of a number of factors that play a huge part. In our sport, the skill of throwing the shot will win the game, but all the extra areas that we were allowed to dabble in helped us to perform. It is necessary to go abroad to gain that experience. Canada has more than 2 million curlers, whereas we have only 15,000. In Canada, curling is on a high level and is televised every weekend. Curlers in Canada are used to that scene. For us to reach that level and to be able to beat Canada, we must perform in that environment so that we can learn from it.

Michael Matheson: That is my next point. How does the level of support that we give our curling athletes to enable them to compete at an international level compare with that given by our competitors?

Rhona Martin: We are doing a good job on the elite side. We have won world junior and world men's titles, and European and Olympic titles. We have won all those titles in the past decade, so the sport is doing something right. However, we must keep moving forward because that is what other countries are doing.

Many of the foreigners, especially the Canadians, looked at what we were doing when we won the Olympics. That was good, and we are on top now, but we need to stay there and keep moving forward. With the help of the Scottish Institute of Sport and sportscotland, we are doing that. However, my concern is with the youngsters coming through, who are the future of the sport—without them, we will not be at the top.

Michael Matheson: My final question is on the issue of resources overall. Do winter sports—if I may refer to curling as a winter sport—get a fair slice of the cake in relation to support for athletes compared with what track-and-field sports get?

Rhona Martin: I do not know what the track-and-field or summer sports get. Obviously, I have seen curling develop from having no lottery funding and no help, right through to the present position—it has been great to see the difference. We probably get less than other sports get, but if we use the money that we get to compete at world level and win, that is great because it means that we are getting the money that we need to compete at that level. However, the problem is with the funding below that level, and we need to look at that. We have a good structure in place just now and a pathway for the elite athletes to move forward; the problem is with the level underneath that.

The Convener: Is the figure of 15,000 that you mentioned the number of people who participate in curling at the gentle team level at their local ice rink?

Rhona Martin: It is club-level curlers who are affiliated to the governing body.

The Convener: How many are there at elite level?

Rhona Martin: At elite level, the Scottish institute has roughly five full teams—some individuals are in there as well—and the national academy's teams are below that level. We are talking about a low number.

The Convener: Which is?

Rhona Martin: Well, with the institute's four or five teams, the national academy's eight teams and the regional academy, we have perhaps 40 athletes throughout the country. There are fewer than 100 on the elite pathway.

The Convener: The committee is obviously looking at trying to get the public at large engaged in sport, and I was wondering how many curl at a gentler pace than the pace of your level.

Rhona Martin: In the past two years, we have been holding come-and-try days for all age groups at every ice rink. We are not just targeting children; we are trying to increase participation in clubs.

Ross Finnie: I will follow up the questions that Michael Matheson asked about the difficult issue of coaching. I must confess that I am tempted to ask whether you currently coach our youngsters always to win their matches with the final shot on the final end, but I will not ask that—perhaps that way of winning should not be passed on because of the suspense that it caused in the nation. I hope that you are coaching the youngsters to win rather earlier in the proceedings, wonderful though the win was.

You have been helpful in exposing a difficult gap and honest in saying that the elite path currently works reasonably well, and that your concerns are more about sustaining the flow through. You also expressed the view that, ideally, it would be good to have more full-time coaches, particularly at ice rinks. Although I will have to wait to hear the others who will give evidence in this inquiry, I suspect that, given that we do not have many majority sports—most of the sports that we will hear from are, I think, effectively minority sports—the problem that you highlighted will be reasonably common.

I want to press you a bit on that gap. To go simply from being a volunteer to being full time is difficult in any sport, in commitment terms and, in particular, in cost terms. How can we use resources to try to bridge that gap and ensure that more coaches are available in curling to bring on the youngsters? That is the nub of the matter. Wild enthusiasts come along, but they are not doing the full-time job that you would like them to do. The

resource issue might mean that a structure is needed to bridge the gap. Can you help us with that?

11:00

Rhona Martin: The governing body in Scotland runs a coaching programme—coaches have a level 1 or level 2 pass. All those coaches are volunteers. We have coaches who are trained to provide the service but, as they are only volunteers, they might do a limited number of hours a week. That is great—perhaps such a coach will run a junior club or an after-school club. People are interested in helping the sport but, in modern life, they need to be reimbursed for their effort or the hours that they put in. An ice rink would have a huge boost if somebody could be funded just to be there 20 hours a week to run the different clubs, to help juniors through and to direct juniors in the right way. The people are there and are keen, but not a lot of curlers who have been at my level can go and coach in the sport. We have many good coaches around the country in all ice rinks, but we must find a way to involve them more. We cannot ask for any more from the volunteers, who do a lot in their hours.

Ross Finnie: I understand that. If we strip all that away, the issue is about resources—money.

Rhona Martin: Absolutely.

Ross Finnie: The committee's inquiry is on improving pathways into sport and on encouraging broader sporting engagement throughout Scotland. In answer to an earlier question, you gave a good example of a six-week swimming programme that you managed to split into one three-week swimming section and one three-week curling section. The more sports that are involved, the more difficult the situation is because, below a minimum period, the activity would not be worth while—young people would not be sufficiently interested in or aware of the activity for it to have an impact. What is the minimum slot that any sport would have to have in a school to have any effect?

Rhona Martin: Our curling's cool programme has a four-week slot at the moment, because we felt that many schools were put off by the cost of transport for six weeks. We went down to four weeks but had longer sessions. That length of time is ideal, because kids can finish the programme and get their wee skill awards and they are happy. Then they ask, "What do we do now?" and we tell them about after-school clubs and junior clubs. The kids are keen and are going on from that programme.

There is a huge cultural change. When I was a member of a junior club many moons ago, it had more than 100 members. My ice rink's junior club now has eight members. Many ice rinks are

struggling to recruit juniors, which is where the gap exists. When I played in the Scottish junior championships, more than 40 teams entered. This year, the competition went straight to the Scottish finals, because only eight teams were involved. The number of juniors is dropping. As you say, the question is how we get volunteers to step up. Our governing body has a coaching programme in place to ensure that all the people who are involved are qualified, but the issue is getting them to do the hours that we need them to do.

Ross Finnie: That is a serious point. Why has the number of juniors fallen off? It is not many years since your Olympic success.

Rhona Martin: Children are keen but, as I said, some facilities have shut. Ice rinks are used for hockey, skating and curling, and curling has perhaps only three days a week, so what can be done is limited. Kids are a lot busier nowadays, so we knew that there would be a drop-off, but the drop-off has been dramatic. That is why we are encouraging adoption of the curling's cool programme throughout the country. Our governing body is looking into coaching now really to try to progress those kids.

We felt that there was a drop-off at 16 or 17 as well. Although "juniors" means under-21s, we have now started an under-17s league. The younger people play in that, and we hold them there until we progress them into the under-21s league. That step has been good as well.

The Convener: Will you expand on what your four-week programme involves? How often do the children come? Is it once a week?

Rhona Martin: They come once a week for four weeks. When the programme was six weeks, they came for an hour but, since we moved to a four-week programme, we try to do an hour and a half.

The Convener: Transport and other costs are sewn into that.

Rhoda Grant: I will go back to the point about getting young people involved in the sport. Rhona Martin talked about going into schools. The curling in schools programme is good, but what are the barriers for young people who take part in it? You say that the schools struggle with the expense of allowing children to go on the programme for four weeks. Someone from a not very well-off background would not be able to follow through and become a member of a club if they faced the same cost barriers.

Rhona Martin: Because the ice rinks are not within walking distance of schools, children cannot go along to after-school clubs if their parents are not there to give them a run at that time. In rural areas, unless the parents are willing to give them a run, the children do not come. We have tried the

odd pilot scheme bussing children into after-school clubs. Those were good, but their purpose was just to find out how the approach worked and we cannot fund it every week. The purpose was also to find out whether the kids really were that keen, which they were. They want to come, but the main barrier is getting to the ice rink.

We are limited by the times that curling has in certain ice rinks and the limited time that the coach has. If a coach was there even three days a week full time, the kids could go when they wanted to go.

I do not know the solution to getting the kids in. We are putting them through and they enjoy it, but we cannot keep them.

Rhoda Grant: Transport is an obvious cost. In the Highlands and Islands, which Mary Scanlon and I represent, the cost to people is huge because the number of ice rinks is limited. What other costs are involved in the sport? What would the other cost barriers be for a young person who lived in the centre of Glasgow, for example, where the ice rink is a short bus ride away?

Rhona Martin: There is no cost for equipment. There are stones at the ice rink, so young people do not need to get them. They can have their own shoes but they do not need to. The ice rink can also supply sliders and brushes. The children do not need any equipment of their own.

What ice rinks charge juniors varies. It can be £1 for a two-hour session. Braehead shopping and leisure centre runs a really good junior club, where the children have an hour on the ice, come off for juice and a biscuit and go back on for another hour. They pay £2 for two hours of curling, which is great. That is in a good location, because the parents can go shopping at Braehead and leave the kids under supervision for two hours, which is great. However, it is not the same in every area.

Rhoda Grant: So the main barrier is really access to rinks and the cost of getting children to them.

Ian McKee: I want to follow up on the point that, apart from the grand bonspiel on the Lake of Menteith, which takes place about every 15 years, curling is an indoor sport that needs a rink. Will you tell me a bit more about the number of rinks in Scotland that are accessible to ordinary curlers? Are there any private rinks, and are they open to talented people? How many rinks are there in Scotland? Is the number adequate?

Rhoda Grant: We had more than 30, but the number has reduced—a couple have closed in the past few years. The dedicated curling rinks, such as my home rink—Greenacres curling rink—are out in the middle of nowhere, so unless children have parents or buses to take them there, they

cannot go. There is no public transport to Greenacres, but it is a curling rink seven days a week. Gogar ice rink was a dedicated curling rink, but it shut two years ago.

We are losing the dedicated rinks. The council-run ones may have curling only three days a week. The Magnum centre in Irvine stopped curling last year. We are losing those facilities. There are probably 26 rinks in the country that have curling, but only a handful of dedicated curling rinks have curling seven days a week. Unfortunately, rinks are often not accessible, although Braehead is good as it is accessible seven days a week.

Ian McKee: In the rinks that are not dedicated to curling, what proportion of time is allocated to curling? Has that changed over the past few years?

Rhona Martin: No—because skating and ice hockey bring the money into the ice rinks. Rather than have the junior curlers in, who perhaps pay only £1 a head, the ice rinks have to look at their revenue and their profit, so ice hockey and skating win.

School holidays are a great time to run a curling camp or a week's coaching, but those ice rinks all have skating full time in the holidays, because they make more money from that.

Ian McKee: Has the proportion of time that is devoted to curling at an average public ice rink changed?

Rhona Martin: No, not really. We have just lost a couple of ice rinks that were dedicated curling rinks. The remaining curling rinks are still there seven days a week, but the other rinks probably have curling three days a week.

Ian McKee: So, since your success in the Olympics, the number of young people coming into curling has diminished, the number of rinks available in Scotland has diminished and the amount of ice time has not increased. What does that say about the benefit of elite sport in encouraging sport in Scotland?

Rhona Martin: It is very disappointing. I am disappointed, because when we came back we were very happy about the media coverage that we got—we had not realised that it was even being shown in Scotland. When we came back and realised that people had been watching curling, we thought, "Great! People now know what it is." We are succeeding at elite level and the youngsters are coming in, but we cannot keep them. That is the biggest problem, and it is disappointing.

What is great is that at any school that I go into, the pupils are encouraged. They would love to try indoor curling—they want to come and try it. They

are very enthusiastic and like to touch the medal. That is great, if it encourages youngsters to take part in any sport, but it is disappointing when they do not stay in the sport.

The Convener: I will take you back to your school days. You said that when you were 17, your brother was engaged in curling. Did you take part in sport before that?

Rhona Martin: I did the usual sports at school: hockey, badminton and swimming. When I was about to leave school, I wanted a hobby that was different. My four older brothers all golfed, so they wanted me to golf, but I said that I could not be bothered because the putting had to be too precise.

The Convener: There you go—there is an irony in that, is there not?

Rhona Martin: My brother won the Scottish junior championships and went to Canada. I went to watch and I thought, “This is great. Everybody is sociable, it is a great sport and it is great fun.”

The Convener: I ask because children used to run about the streets and play—they did their exercise that way—but they do not do that any more. We want to get them involved in sports. Yours was a sporting family.

Rhona Martin: Yes, it was.

When I go into schools and speak to the kids, particularly after Christmas, it seems that 90 per cent of the boys have Wiis, PlayStations and so on, which they sit and play. That is the culture that they are in, and this is about trying to get them out of that. The after-school clubs are great—the kids go to them straight from school, rather than going home and thinking, “I can’t be bothered to go back out.” We are trying to get them straight from school, so that they are doing something.

The Convener: I think that the Parliament would share that motive.

Thank you very much for coming before the committee. It has been extremely interesting.

Congratulations from all of us. As Ross Finnie articulated on behalf of the committee, we all watched that win—we were on the edge of our seats. I hope that somebody does it differently another time, because we cannot keep our nails when we watch such close finishes.

11:14

Meeting continued in private until 12:23.

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