



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE

Thursday 2 May 2013

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EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE

14th Meeting 2013, Session 4

CONVENER

*Mary Fee (West Scotland) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Marco Biagi (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*John Finnie (Highlands and Islands) (Ind)

*Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con)

*John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)

*Siobhan McMahon (Central Scotland) (Lab)

*Dennis Robertson (Aberdeenshire West) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Irene Audain (Scottish Out of School Care Network)

Jackie Brock (Children in Scotland)

Dr Margaret Anne Craig (Clyde Biosciences)

Sarah Jackson (Working Families)

Satwat Rehman (One Parent Families Scotland)

Clare Simpson (Parenting across Scotland)

Maggie Simpson (Scottish Childminding Association)

Claire Telfer (Save the Children)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Douglas Thornton

LOCATION

Committee Room 1

Scottish Parliament

Equal Opportunities Committee

Thursday 2 May 2013

[The Convener *opened the meeting at 09:30*]

Women and Work

The Convener (Mary Fee): Good morning and welcome to the 14th meeting in 2013 of the Equal Opportunities Committee. I remind everyone to set electronic devices to flight mode or to switch them off as they interfere with the broadcasting and videoconferencing equipment.

We will start with introductions. At the table, we have our clerking and research team and the official reporters, and around the room we are supported by broadcasting and the security office. As well as the witnesses at the table, Sarah Jackson of Working Families is joining us via videoconference. Good morning, Sarah, and thank you for joining us.

Sarah Jackson (Working Families): Good morning.

The Convener: If you wish to respond to any of the committee members' questions, you should just raise your hand and we will include you when we seek answers.

Sarah Jackson: That is understood.

The Convener: I am the committee convener and ask members and witnesses to introduce themselves in turn.

Marco Biagi (Edinburgh Central) (SNP): I am the MSP for Edinburgh Central and deputy convener of the committee.

Dennis Robertson (Aberdeenshire West) (SNP): I am the MSP for Aberdeenshire West.

John Finnie (Highlands and Islands) (Ind): I am a Highlands and Islands MSP.

Siobhan McMahon (Central Scotland) (Lab): I am a Central Scotland MSP.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): I am the MSP for Glasgow Shettleston.

Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con): I am a North East Scotland MSP.

Irene Audain (Scottish Out of School Care Network): I am chief executive of the Scottish Out of School Care Network, which is a national organisation that supports the nearly 1,000 providers of out-of-school care for children in Scotland.

Jackie Brock (Children in Scotland): I am chief executive of Children in Scotland, which is a membership organisation that comprises more than 400 organisations and individuals who work or participate in children's services in Scotland.

Dr Margaret Anne Craig (Clyde Biosciences): I am chief executive officer of Clyde Biosciences, which is a spin off from the University of Glasgow.

Satwat Rehman (One Parent Families Scotland): I am the director of One Parent Families Scotland, which provides services and support for lone parents and runs flexible childcare services.

Clare Simpson (Parenting across Scotland): I am from parenting across Scotland, which is a partnership of children's and other charities that work together to provide a focus on parenting.

Maggie Simpson (Scottish Childminding Association): I am chief executive of the Scottish Childminding Association, which is a membership organisation comprising about 80 per cent of childminders in Scotland.

Claire Telfer (Save the Children): I am head of policy, advocacy and campaigns at Save the Children in Scotland.

The Convener: Thank you for that. The first item on our agenda is an evidence session on women and work, with a focus on childcare. The committee has a number of questions for our witnesses; we will start with John Mason, who will ask about part-time working, after which John Finnie will ask about childminding and supply and demand.

John Mason: The paper by Sarah Jackson from Working Families brought one or two points to my attention. We have spent a lot of time on flexible working, part-time working and job sharing and, in her submission, Ms Jackson suggests that although jobs in the civil service are not necessarily advertised as being part-time, they might well turn out to be when investigated and that there is a need to raise the quality and level of part-time jobs, which it is suggested might traditionally be less well paid. Is it just the civil service that needs to do what you suggest or should that happen more widely? Is it reasonable to expect employers to do it?

Sarah Jackson: What I suggest could be done much more widely. We want the public sector in general to advertise all jobs as being suitable for flexible or part-time working, unless the hiring manager can make a very clear business case for not doing so.

In carrying out the research, which looked initially at civil service jobs, our researcher discovered that although the vast majority were

advertised as full-time posts, when she picked up the phone and spoke to the department in question the person at the other end would quite often say that the department was open to a discussion about part-time working or job sharing.

We are therefore pleased that the United Kingdom Government has said that in the Children and Families Bill it is looking for civil service jobs to be consistently advertised as being available for part-time or flexible working. We think, however, that that should at the very least be extended to the public sector. After all, the Government has the power to impose such a change, and we hope that the move will influence the private and third sectors and that they, too, will take it up.

The fact is that such advertising is a barrier to people with caring responsibilities. Parents who have disabled children—or who just have children—cannot wait the 26 weeks that comes with the right to make a flexible working request; they need to know from the off that their working pattern is going to fit with their family and childcare needs.

John Mason: Many employers think in terms of whole people; in other words, they say that they need one accountant, two cashiers or whatever, when in fact they should probably be thinking, “I need 1.5 people for this job and 0.8 for that job.” Does employers’ thinking need to change?

Sarah Jackson: There is a need for a change not just in thinking but in support and guidance. You are right: employers tend to think of jobs in terms of Lego blocks. To them, every job is Monday to Friday and 35 or 40 hours a week. However, we need to think about the role itself and what it needs to deliver to the organisation. It might turn out that you do not require a 40-hour-a-week position and that you need someone to work only 27 or 16 hours. You should then go out and find that set of skills to match that number of hours; you should not restrict your talent or recruitment pool by forcing everyone to fit the default Lego brick model setting.

Satwat Rehman: I endorse those comments and think it particularly important that we look at the support and guidance that are given to employers. One Parent Families Scotland has found that even employers who have been sympathetic to recruiting lone parents and providing a degree of flexibility in their working hours are making it quite difficult for those people to take up and sustain work. For example, we are finding more and more that although the retail jobs that are being advertised might be for only 16 hours, the employees are expected to work those hours at any time during opening hours, which could be from 7 am to 10 pm. Saying that you will be available at any time within those hours will be

very difficult for most parents, and for lone parents in particular.

As a result, we need support and guidance to be available. There might be exemplar employers who can provide workers who have families with stability in terms of knowing the hours that they are going to be working while ensuring that their business needs are met.

The Convener: Clare—did you indicate that you want to respond to that question?

Clare Simpson: No, but perhaps I can endorse the point that I made in my submission, which is that quite often providing the little bit of flexibility that allows a person to go in at 9.30 instead of 9, or to be available to pick up their children, does not require employers to make big changes. Indeed, where employers are flexible, lone parents or those in two-parent families are able to adjust their childcare to fit the situation more easily. The section in the UK Children and Families Bill that Sarah Jackson referred to will apply UK wide and therefore to Scotland. If such jobs are advertised as being suitable for part-time working and if people are allowed to apply for flexible working from day 1, they will be able to arrange their childcare to fit.

The Convener: Does anyone else wish to respond?

Jackie Brock: Can I check whether you are going to ask about students and flexibility with regard to training opportunities and skills development? If not, I think it worth logging up front the need for flexible childcare arrangements and for ensuring that they are known about, because not just young parents but other parents who might be training, upskilling or whatever need flexibility with regard to childcare and to deal with the arrangements that they might put in place for the school day or the academic week. Flexibility in and availability of childcare provision to enable young women to develop their skills is a crucial issue that I would have thought the committee would have been interested in.

Sarah Jackson: I also think that there is an opportunity to upskill Jobcentre Plus advisers and to get them to work with local employers to think differently about job needs, and to ensure that they do not automatically advertise everything as a full-time job.

Working alongside a number of UK-wide employer organisations such as the Scottish Chambers of Commerce, Working Families has developed a very simple strapline—“Happy to talk flexible working”—which we will be looking to pilot this year. The idea is to get employers to start using that in recruitment advertising, so that an applicant knows that they can talk about the hours that would suit them at the point of application

rather than having to wait until they have been offered the job or have been there for 26 weeks. They would get the opportunity early on to have a grown-up conversation about what the business needs and what the employee needs.

John Mason: Another matter to consider is welfare reform and its impact on childcare. We received a briefing from the Scottish Parliament information centre that mentions changes that took place in 2011 that reduced the maximum coverage of costs from 80 to 70 per cent. As we move to the universal credit system, there will, potentially, be limits on how much the component can increase. Is that a major part of the problem with childcare?

Satwat Rehman: We will probably all want to come in on that one.

The whole package of welfare reforms and all the changes to benefits have—as you will know—left women as the group on which the changes will have the greatest impact. In the work that we do with lone parents, we have found that the change from 80 to 70 per cent of costs being met has meant that work does not pay for many of the parents with whom we work. It has made childcare even less affordable for them than it was before.

All the new changes that were originally announced, and some of the changes that have come in since then, have just created an even more confused picture for parents, who are finding it more difficult to work out whether they can afford childcare. SPICe has done some analysis, but some of the latest analysis—which I think was in the papers yesterday—showed that many of the lowest-income families will be worse off under the new changes to childcare funding.

For One Parent Families Scotland, aligned with that is the concern that there will be increasing conditionality on lone parents as their youngest child turns five and the parent enters mandated work activity. The biggest problem that lone parents bring to us is childcare—how they can find childcare that they can afford so that they can make work pay for them. We are finding anecdotally that Jobcentre Plus advisers are not acknowledging that as a legitimate reason for parents not to take up jobs that they are being asked to take up. They are being threatened with sanctions, and some are now having their benefits taken away. At issue is the knock-on effect of childcare not being available and what that means for families on low incomes. We are starting to look at how we can make the case for more affordable childcare.

Maggie Simpson: From the childminders' perspective—on the supply side, so to speak—the situation is equally difficult. The change to 70 per cent of costs being met has meant that more people are defaulting on their childcare payments.

You would think that childcare would be at the top of their list, but it clearly cannot be. As a result, the people who provide childcare are looking at who is coming through the door and deciding whether they can take the risk if that person is in receipt of that type of welfare.

Flexibility is fine, but the flexibility that childminders are being asked to provide involves people saying, "I want 16 hours of childcare, but I have no idea when it will be." It is impossible for childminders to work within the required ratios or to provide a quality service, and it makes for a difficult relationship between the parent and the childcare provider.

Claire Telfer: I endorse what Satwat Rehman said. We know that the cost of childcare is a huge barrier, particularly for mothers who are living on lower incomes, and we have found from some of our work with parents that they are not only unable to take up work opportunities, but in some cases are having to give up work because of difficulties with childcare. That is sometimes to do with the cost, and sometimes with availability. Mothers have been in employment, but have had to give it up because of lack of childcare, which is compounding the problem. We are concerned about the impact that that will have in terms of increasing levels of child poverty over the next few years—which we know will be a big concern—and the impact on the outcomes for, and wellbeing of, children and mothers. We need to look at ways in which we can better support the supply and costs of childcare in the Scottish context.

09:45

Irene Audain: We are worried about the impact of the change to universal credit on the supply of out-of-school care because that is one of the ways in which it is subsidised financially, although it is subsidised in other ways, such as free school lets and so on. We are worried that the long-term impact will be to reduce the supply of out-of-school care. If there is any kind of economic upturn, people will start to look for more childcare and it will not be there.

Many of the existing out-of-school care places are there as a result of the £30 million investment that was made 10 years ago. That kind of money is not around any more, so we really need to do something to retain the services that we have. We have been hearing from services that, even with the 10 per cent cut that was made last year, parents cannot afford childcare and are reducing the number of hours that they use the services, and are maybe using granny or auntie for another evening. That reduces the income for the services, which have to be sustainable. If a small rural service only serves two or three families, that

service will go under. The reforms will have a major impact.

Maggie Simpson: The situation is the same in childminding. Our surveys show that more people are looking for part-time places, which makes it increasingly difficult for services to be viable. It should also be borne in mind that many of the parents are lone parents who are in receipt of welfare benefits, so it is a vicious circle.

The Convener: John Finnie has questions on childminding, and then Dennis Robertson will ask about regulation.

John Finnie: My question is for Maggie Simpson, initially. Thank you for your evidence. I note that you touched in particular on the 2011 statistics and the contrast between childminding in remote areas and urban areas. I want to get on the record an understanding of the role of childminding. You said that childminding businesses are increasingly complex and you mentioned people defaulting on payment. You also talked about the extension of public liability insurance to cover people who look after children in their own homes. Are there any plans for the members of your organisation to expand? Given the nature of the work, I assume that there is an optimum number of hours for safe working anyway.

Maggie Simpson: That question is interesting. Individual childminders are self-employed, so they can in effect pick and choose the hours that they can work. That is partly determined by what they feel they are able to do and partly by regulation—they have to provide evidence that they are providing a good-quality service. They are therefore quite rightly restricted in the number of children whom they can look after at any one time. However, the number of hours is not defined; it is more about what the childminder is doing. They have in many cases to combine childminding with their own family responsibilities, and they are driven by demand and what people ask for.

Increasingly, however, childminding is being asked for at different times of the day. Whereas at one time, childminders were mostly looking to provide daytime services, they are increasingly and quite rightly being asked to provide services in the evenings or even at the weekends. They have to mix and match their own responsibilities and what they are being asked to provide as a business, and they need to show the regulator that what they provide is good quality. Does that answer your question?

John Finnie: Yes, thank you.

Notwithstanding the difference between urban and rural areas, do your members attract a type of client that other providers do not attract?

Maggie Simpson: Obviously, it is easier for childminders to provide flexibility because they do not have to have a building and staff and all the overheads that go along with that. They provide a service in their own homes so they can combine their work with their family responsibilities.

If I am being asked to provide a service on a Saturday morning, the fact that I have my own family there as well is fine; I just take the child along and they become part of what is going on that day. In terms of what parents are often looking for, it is easier for the childminder to provide flexibility. That is the key thing.

John Finnie: If I may broaden that out—

The Convener: May I stop you there? Margaret Anne Craig wants to come in on that specific point.

Dr Craig: I want to comment on regulation of childminding hours. In my post as a company chief executive officer, I have to work a lot outside normal working hours. I see a real need for childminding coverage in evenings, early mornings and at weekends. There should be a real childminding service set up so that that can happen. Regulation of childminding hours will restrict many jobs; it could curtail my job—it would make things very difficult for me in terms of travel, especially international travel, and evening and weekend work.

Maggie Simpson: I may be confusing matters: it is not that the regulator would stop the person from working flexible hours; it is simply that people will need to provide evidence that they are providing a good-quality service. That is a different emphasis. As a parent, you would ask that the childminder was not just ignoring your child but was providing a service. There is no restriction in terms of hours, for the regulator.

John Finnie: I have a question for all our witnesses on supply and demand. There is a recurring theme in that area, so I am sure that we will not be too surprised by what we hear today. I would like to understand from each witness how they see the role of the state. Clearly, there is a range of providers. What should be done? You suggest that there should be a role for the state. There are funding issues to consider. Would your organisations support a call for increased taxation specifically to pay for that?

Jackie Brock: Children in Scotland has a long record of taking a particular perspective on that. First, in terms of the strengths of the Scottish system, increasingly there is a strong view across the political spectrum—of which, obviously, the committee is a part—that childcare is a crucial part of our economic infrastructure. We are delighted that school-age children as well as children in the early years are being considered. If we are going to support people, and to support women in

particular, to become increasingly skilled and valuable in our economy, childcare must be an important part of our economic policies.

Equally, it is clear across the political spectrum that childcare is viewed as an important social justice issue, particularly in terms of narrowing the inequity gap. Out-of-school care in the important early years is crucial for improving any child's chances. It is fantastic that we have got that—I do not think that that sort of settled political view exists in other parts of the UK. Those political planks, as it were, are a huge strength and asset for Scotland.

When we look at how we are investing in our infrastructure through childcare and our social justice policies, we see that at least £8 billion at UK level is being spent on a combination of subsidies, tax breaks and so on. That works pretty well for parents who can afford childcare, and where the childcare is available, it is of sufficiently good quality and is flexible enough to meet their needs.

In a Scottish context, therefore, we have a pretty small subsection of parents who benefit from the current market forces—namely, from the subsidies that allow parents to identify where in the market there is suitable childcare, from birth through to, let us say, adolescence. The current system is not just not working. As we say in our joint submission to the committee, we believe that the alternative is the incredibly welcome investment that is happening. I think that £80 million has been identified for extension of free childcare to 600 hours, for example.

That is welcome, but when you place the £80 million in the context of the system—which is worth nearly £1 billion—that is subsidising parents in Scotland, we are really just tinkering, so we have to ask whether the current way of subsidising childcare and out-of-school care is fit for purpose and will meet our aspirations. We say that it is not and will not; the members of Children in Scotland would say that we need at least to have a vision of subsidising the supply side, which goes well with the grain of how we do business in Scotland. We have community planning partnerships; obviously, they are being refreshed, but they nonetheless represent how Scotland wants to approach its planning and delivery of local services.

We have plurality in providers. Universal services have a crucial role to play, but there is a range of other providers within a good regulatory system, and we have in place all the levers that we need to deliver the transformational childcare system that the First Minister has talked about. However, we do not have the appropriate ways of subsidising that.

You asked whether we should increase taxes. I think that it is important for us to think about how we can far more efficiently use the significant subsidy that is already in place.

John Finnie: How would you make those efficiencies?

Jackie Brock: Given that we already spend £8 billion at UK level on a system that is working for a very small proportion of parents, we should think about transferring that money to the supply side—into a Scottish system, for example—and invest that money locally. That is, broadly, the model that is used in other countries. Obviously it would need to be made fit for purpose in the Scottish context. Scotland's share of the UK expenditure is around £1 billion. What could we do with that money? I think that we could develop a far better system.

Satwat Rehman: I endorse everything that Jackie Brock has said. The paper that we submitted collectively discussed some of those issues and made those points. Currently, as Jackie said, we have a mixed market. We have the private sector, the public sector and the voluntary sector, there are self-employed people and charities such as mine that run flexible childcare. With regard to the short-term role of the state, we should look at how we can manage that market better and more effectively. Jackie Brock has outlined where we want to be, but it will take some time to get there. In the meantime, we need to map services to see how they are distributed across the country, and whether they are meeting the needs of parents.

There is a policy disjoint, because the demand-side subsidy through parents is a reserved matter and the responsibility for childcare is a devolved matter. In the short term, we need to think about how we could match up those two elements more effectively, align any subsidies or fees and make recommendations for fee levels that would make best use of the existing subsidies.

We do a lot of work with parents to support them in taking up their entitlement. Many parents do not take up all that they are entitled to.

The beauty of the supply-side approach is that it would address the questions about how parents who work pay for childcare and how parents who are in training and education pay for childcare. Currently, there are institution-specific subsidies that parents can access. We need to put all that together and see how we can use the whole investment to create a more efficient and more accessible and affordable system.

Dennis Robertson: The Scottish Government is asking the Council of Economic Advisers to consider childcare and to think about the best way forward. There is a blank sheet of paper. What

outcome do you hope to see from that consideration?

10:00

Jackie Brock: In our collective submission, we asked whether a group such as ours could meet the Council of Economic Advisers, because we are concerned that the economic case that is made—which I am sure will be excellent—needs to be informed by what we feel is right for the quality of childcare in Scotland and for our children. We need look only at the current debate in England, where consideration is being given to increasing the ratio of children to staff in return—the UK Government would say—for requiring higher standards of qualification for the professionals. That has raised a lot of concerns, and we are all clear that that would not work in a Scottish context.

We would like to help the Council of Economic Advisers to ensure that it sees some of its recommendations through the prism of what we think is best for quality. In addition, of course, we need to open up a debate in which we look at the balance. Our recommendation is that it would be great if the Council of Economic Advisers report helps us to do the jigsaw, which, as Satwat Rehman mentioned, involves working out how we can get from our current position to a position in which, over the longer term, we have available to us the full economic drivers that would enable us to have a far more planned approach to childcare at a local level.

Clare Simpson: I endorse what Jackie Brock and Satwat Rehman said about supply and demand. Here we are at the Equal Opportunities Committee talking about women and work. Very often, childcare is seen as a woman's responsibility. We must widen it out and say that childcare is more than that—it is the whole family's responsibility. Beyond that, I think that it is society's responsibility.

All too often, if we trawl down to the comments at the foot of articles about childcare in newspapers, we find questions about why we should pay for childcare. We should pay for childcare for reasons of social justice—there is the argument about getting people out of poverty. There is also a strong case to be made that childcare benefits the whole of society, economic regeneration, businesses and so on. We must make that case.

The previous Government at Westminster—the Labour Government—put quite a lot of money into childcare and the tax credit system, in particular. It was telling that, earlier this year, Beverley Hughes, who was Minister of State for Children, Young People and Families in that Government, put her

hands up and said that that Government had got it wrong by not putting the money where it should have been put. She said that that Government should have put it into supply rather than demand, as that would have been a more effective way of regenerating the economy and providing a solution on social justice and poverty.

Claire Telfer: I endorse what has been said about supply-side funding. It will be interesting to see the economic case that the Council of Economic Advisers makes for that.

The work that the Council of Economic Advisers is doing is not the only bit of work that is being done on childcare in the Scottish Government. There is the early years task force, which has a sub-group that is looking at childcare. There is the women and employment strategic group, which followed on from the women's employment summit. We need to consider how we can bring all those elements together so that we look holistically at the economic case and how we ensure that quality is built into the system so that outcomes for children improve. Co-ordination across Government is needed.

We need to look at the various policy agendas and the outcomes that the child poverty strategy, the early years framework and our economic strategy are trying to achieve. Childcare is a cross-cutting issue that can help us to achieve many of those outcomes. It is extremely important to adopt a co-ordinated approach.

In its work, the Council of Economic Advisers will have to look at the system that we would like to have, how much it might cost and what the state's role is in funding that; it will also have to look at how much of that cost is transferred to parents.

We know that, particularly from the perspective of parents living on low incomes, the cost of and access to childcare are a big issue in accessing work, so what can we do and what is the state's role in supporting the reduction of that cost to parents? We need to learn from other systems, such as the models used in Denmark and other Nordic countries in which there are caps on fees and sliding scales, so that those on lower incomes pay less. It would be useful if the Council of Economic Advisers, along with other parts of Government that are working on the issue, could look at that, too.

Sarah Jackson: It is incredibly encouraging that the committee is looking at childcare as part of the infrastructure. A problem with childcare is that it is seen as a private concern. To pick up on Clare Simpson's point, people need to understand that childcare is not only a women's issue but a family issue.

To return to the original question, there is a role for the Government to put out messages that remind couple families in particular that childcare is an investment in their children's future and that they should think about both their salaries and not just the woman's salary. Women are forced out of the workplace when they decide that it is not worth while going back to work because the cost of childcare is put against only their wages. It would be very helpful to have strong messages from our political leaders that say, "Childcare is for men and women; it's an investment in the family's future."

On planning, there is a need to think about the role of employers, too. Employers expect employees—who might be parents—to work atypical hours. They want employees in the evenings and at the weekends; they want them when childcare is not there for children. Working families want planning, particularly of large developments, to include consideration of the likely childcare demand by the employees of the employers that will be in those developments. For example, it might be possible for the developer to put in childcare facilities. Those should not be only for under-fives; it would be great to have drop-in centres where teenagers could go after school to do their homework or hang out and chill while mum or dad is at work.

We should also look at employers. Why not set up a system in which they are asked to subsidise their employees' childcare costs? Frankly, employers are paying low wages to women and men whom they are asking to work long hours outside school hours, and they must bear an element of the cost of providing the infrastructure that makes their businesses function and makes UK and Scottish business successful.

John Mason: If I understand it correctly, One Parent Families Scotland runs flexible childcare. Its submission says:

"Such flexible childcare is not cheap to deliver".

How much more does childcare in the evenings and at weekends cost?

Satwat Rehman: That is like many things—it can cost as little or as much as you want it to. Because we have a system whereby we have support and we want to provide a certain quality of service, we would charge £15 an hour for full cost recovery.

In the past, local authorities used to invest in flexible childcare. That still happens in certain rural parts of Scotland, such as Aberdeenshire, where such childcare is seen as particularly useful for those who must work flexible or atypical hours in areas where it is easier for a childcare worker to be at home with someone's children in the evening than it is for someone to take their child to a centre or somewhere else. That approach allows the

child to have their evening or morning routines and maintain their links with their friends and community. It is expensive to deliver not only because of its flexibility but because we must factor in the travel distances in rural areas.

The £15 charge that I mentioned can cover up to three children in a family. Support for 70 per cent of that figure still leaves quite a gap for parents on a low income to cover. We set up the service particularly to complement available childcare and to wrap around what had traditionally been the 8 am to 6 pm childcare day, so the service can run from 6.30 in the morning until 10.30 in the evening.

John Mason: That is helpful—thank you.

Siobhan McMahon: How do the childcare-at-home services that you provide operate? Do you use other partners to deliver those services? Were parents consulted on what they need? How could we use a similar system throughout Scotland, to ensure that every family benefits?

Satwat Rehman: Some of what Maggie Simpson spoke about in relation to how childminders are developing their services illustrates one approach to increasing flexibility. With the childcare service that we have set up, people pay only for what they use. That perhaps leads to a higher unit cost, but there is no retainer or anything like that.

We had support from quite a few local authorities in the past. However, because we are not a statutory service and we are not fulfilling a statutory requirement, and as we fall between the early years agenda and the economic development agenda, that investment has begun to fall away in quite a few areas. In the past, we could provide a more affordable service to families because of that investment, which allowed us to take the administration costs out of what we would charge families.

We recruit. We have contracted workers, and we provide training and support for them. We have managers and assistant managers, who consult the family. Those managers do risk assessments and examine all the quality indicators, as we would expect from any childcare provider. They then put together a support package.

As far as possible, we offer consistency to childcare workers. Some of the childcare workers have been with the same families for a number of years—particularly families where there are children or young people with additional needs or disabilities. We find that the service works really well in such situations, as we provide the workers with the specialist training that they need to support the child with the additional needs. That should form part of the infrastructure of the childcare that is available.

Margaret Anne Craig and others talked about weekend and evening working. People should know that there is a service that they can rely on, which involves someone going into their home and being with their children.

Dr Craig: I see a need for that. I am surrounded by colleagues who have trained for 10 or 12 years—they are going through master's degrees, PhDs or other degrees—and who are struggling to maintain their careers because of childcare issues. That is especially true for people who work in science, where experimental protocols require their work to run over weekends and evenings. No support is available. I see a lot of loss of females at that stage in their careers, which is a loss of all their skills and training.

Employers have a responsibility to ensure that some support mechanism is in place to keep women in jobs. In the University of Glasgow, for example, there is one nursery facility with only 75 places for the whole university, and it is open to people from outside the university to use it. We are building a lot of new buildings, and we are putting a lot of money into research in the university but, as part of that process, are we ensuring that there is childcare support to help women to sustain their careers rather than have to run out of the door in a panic to collect their children at the end of the day? I do not see that happening.

The Convener: I have a specific question, which I will put initially to Maggie Simpson and Irene Audain, about the take-up of childminding and out-of-school care services in rural areas. Do a higher percentage of women use childminding and out-of-school services in rural areas compared with cities?

Maggie Simpson: I would say yes. That is to do with how childminding works, as opposed to an out-of-school care group service. Because of the level of demand in rural areas, it is often not viable to have a group service, whereas it is viable for an individual childminder to provide the whole range of services, from nought to whatever age of child the parent wants the service for. It is more a question of viability than of whether a group service could actually operate. It would need to be heavily subsidised.

Irene Audain: When numbers go down in smaller out-of-school care services, individuals sometimes go off and become childminders, because they already know the children and the families. It can be the other way round—a group of childminders might get together to set up a group service once the numbers go up again. The childcare sector is quite interchangeable; people work across different parts of it.

In my experience of talking to small rural services, I have talked to childminders who have an assistant. They have, if you like, a mini group service, with the maximum number of children that they can have. They usually mix the care of younger and older children, so it is a bit like an extended family. We support that as a more economically viable option for providing childcare in rural areas.

10:15

Jackie Brock: Unfortunately, we cannot answer your question precisely, because we do not have the evidence. Collectively, we are looking for changes in the recently published Children and Young People (Scotland) Bill. One thing that we will ask for is a requirement for local authorities and CPPs to have information on the provision of childcare, including out-of-school care provision. We cannot answer your question and, without that information, we cannot answer quite a lot of questions about what would work. That is an important point.

Scotland has such a diversity of geography, rurality and so on. We need a commitment to looking at solutions that fit Fife as opposed to Glasgow but, without the information that I referred to, how will we cost the solutions and how will we think about what is right for children and families? We are bedevilled by a lack of proper information.

Maggie Simpson: I will reinforce what Irene Audain said. We have very good examples of extended childminding services. The regulations allow that; it is fine for somebody who is working as a childminder to take on an assistant and, if they can demonstrate quality, they can extend their service. That is often a very good solution for a rural area that might not be able to sustain an out-of-school care group.

The parental preference might be for a child to be in such a setting, for whatever reason. That might also combine with some of the services that Satwat Rehman talked about. There are childminders who are part of those services to provide flexibility, which allows them viability if they provide a very part-time childminding service. The set-up is incredibly complex, but it works if we start by thinking about what parents need and what provides good outcomes for children.

The Convener: Dennis Robertson has questions about regulation and Marco Biagi has questions about the Children and Young People (Scotland) Bill.

Dennis Robertson: We have touched on aspects of regulation. Everyone would probably agree that regulation is necessary for a variety of reasons, but do you see it as a barrier in some respects? Does it put people in a position of

looking for a much more informal alternative to childcare, with relatives, neighbours or people who used to be childminders but who have come out of the profession because of regulation and are childminding informally?

The Convener: I am conscious that Sarah Jackson is to leave us at 10.30, so I will come to her first. Do you have any comments on that or would you like to mention anything else?

Sarah Jackson: To wrap up, I simply say that it is really important to look at childcare as involving more than early years. It is different from early years work, which is education. Childcare operates from birth right through to when a young person is ready to stand on their own two feet and no longer needs parental oversight.

One of the problems with the UK childcare debate is that it focuses on under-fives far too much. We see that with the UK Government's proposed vouchers to replace the existing ones, which are limited to children up to five. Eventually, the age limit will go up to 12, but that leaves a big gap for teenagers.

A critical subject to think about is support for maternity returners, as that is when childcare is at its most expensive and when women are most likely to jump out of the jobs market, because they cannot see how to square the circle in their family incomes. I do not have any easy answers to that. A combination of childcare provision, flexible working and employment planning across the piece needs to be considered.

We should look at maternity returners, older children, after-school care and the additional costs for children with disabilities. We do a lot of work with families who have disabled children and we know how many of the parents concerned give up work because they cannot afford childcare. On average, it costs three times as much to raise a disabled child as it costs to raise a child without a disability.

I am afraid that the committee is looking at a big, complex set of issues. I commend the work that you are doing and thank you for asking us to give evidence today. If we can submit more evidence or exemplars of good employment practice, we will be happy to contribute.

The Convener: Thanks very much for that, and thanks for joining us.

Irene Audain: We completely support regulation to ensure quality. However, one of the patterns that we find in different research in Scotland is that parents often choose kinship care when they can—grandmothers, aunts and close friends—before childcare. That is not always to do with cost and quality issues; it is to do with trust and family relationships. Families are really

affected when family members cannot help with childcare in that way. All the research shows that, if parents out there are asked what their first choice is, they want someone close to them to provide that care.

What was the other part of your question?

Dennis Robertson: It was about whether some of the regulations put barriers in place and whether people are opting for much more informal childcare. Regulation is necessary, but the question is whether, in itself, it has created some barriers and is moving people towards much more informal childcare—not just through kinship care but through people who used to childmind formally and who no longer do so because of the regulation but who still impose a charge, although it is a lower cost.

Maggie Simpson: I know that that happens. We quite often find that the ratios go up and there are more children, but there is no judgment about the quality. It could be argued that the parent ought to be able to decide whether the quality is okay, but that goes against what is happening in regulation. There is good evidence to show that the quality of childminding services has improved since the annual inspections for new childminders were introduced.

If we look at the grading system, there is no doubt that childminders are doing extremely well. However, if that is taken out of the regulatory system, we end up with all sorts of concerns, especially if a person is being paid to provide childcare and that payment comes from an employer or the state. In effect, that is subsidising unregulated childcare, and we could end up with problems with that. If I were providing a regulated childminding service, I would seriously consider why I should do that if I could work legally outside the regulatory system—currently, I could not do that.

Irene Audain is absolutely right about kinship care. A lot of people opt for family members providing childcare. That is about trust, but it is also, undoubtedly, about cost. Although I love the fact that people out there are enjoying their grandchildren, I worry deeply about grandparents who are struggling to provide childcare but are doing it because they feel that they have to. I do not know where the balance is, but I would like it to be about parental preference and outcomes for children, not about the economic side.

Dennis Robertson: Do you feel that there is a great deal of stress for families? Do grandparents or other relatives feel obliged to do something? That could perhaps prevent them from going out and earning an income.

Maggie Simpson: Yes. There are childminders who provide a service for their relatives as well.

That is fine, as that is the job that they have chosen to do. That is an extremely good combination. As I said, where it works well, it works really well. However, I have concerns about the fact that parents are often forced into situations and that relatives or friends feel an obligation to help.

Clare Simpson: I reiterate what Maggie Simpson said about grandparents. Scotland has one of the highest rates in the UK of grandparents providing childcare; from my memory of the data in the growing up in Scotland study, I think that the figure is about 66 per cent, which is incredibly high. That can be done through choice, but the question is whose choice that is. A huge element is about care.

If we think about the issue at the policy level, people talk now about the sandwich generation—people who look after elderly parents on the one hand and grandchildren on the other. That is a stress for people who feel an obligation to do that. Everyone is aware that people of my generation will have to work until we drop, so I cannot see myself being able to provide childcare for my grandchildren, if and when they come. The option is not sustainable, and we must look at the realities of how we provide childcare, which really is about choice for parents.

Claire Telfer: The issue applies particularly to families who live on lower incomes. Last year, we spoke to more than 100 parents across Scotland about their childcare issues and challenges, and one of the key messages from that was about the informal care that is being used. I think that the proportion of those on lower incomes who use that is slightly higher.

For some parents, that was about choice, in that they wanted somebody who knew the family—they wanted trust in the person who was caring for their children. However, for most parents, it was not about choice: they had informal childcare because they could not afford other childcare that was available or because there was a lack of childcare services.

A lot of the people whom we have spoken to are grandparents who have given up work or are working part time so that they can take on caring responsibilities for their grandchildren. We need to consider how we can support families in a more sustainable way, because we are almost compounding the problem for families who live on lower incomes if they have only informal childcare.

Dennis Robertson: Has the number of young carers who are looking after their siblings increased because of the costs of childcare? Young carers who are 14 or younger are looking after their siblings after school.

Satwat Rehman: As a group, lone parents rely heavily on informal childcare. Of those using childcare, 46 per cent have said that it is informal—they use grandparents or make arrangements with the ex-partner, for example, which can of course cause problems. That is mainly because working lone parents who are paying for childcare are much more likely to find it difficult to meet childcare costs than couples who are paying for childcare are. Some choice is involved in using informal childcare, but a lot of that is because of costs.

When we consider what kind of childcare we want in Scotland, we should look at the infrastructure of childcare and have neighbourhood centres or whatever that provide a range of services and are universally available. If that choice was available, we would not have so many thinking about whether to use family members, because they would see a viable alternative that they could afford.

I would argue that regulation is important if it can ensure that we are doing the best to improve and maintain the best outcomes for children and young people. It is very much the view of OPFS that we support regulation in the same way as we support regulation and inspection for schools and school-age children. If we want childcare to be part of our service infrastructure, we need to ensure that it is good quality.

10:30

Maggie Simpson: It is very easy in this debate to put the outcomes for children to one side. All the evidence shows that the quality of care for very young children—continuing to school-age children—is really important. Whether my child benefits should not be about whether I can afford to pay. As the committee has heard from other witnesses, it is low-income parents who may look for kinship care, which may or may not be okay. It is not that they do not want the best for their children—they absolutely do—but they are restricted by what they can afford.

People are not looking for childminding services that are informal or just a one-off; they are looking for a long-term service that they can integrate with the family. That can go on until children become adults—the relationship often continues. That is what we should look for, which combines what people want with strong communities and the issues that Satwat Rehman talked about. I urge the committee to consider the children as well.

The Convener: An interesting point has been made about the increase in the number of grandparents looking after children. I am sure that we all know people who have either reduced their hours or given up work to look after grandchildren.

This is not the inquiry to do that, but it would be interesting in the long term to look at the impact on pensioner poverty when grandparents feel they have to reduce their hours or leave work to care for grandchildren.

Marco Biagi has questions about the Children and Young People (Scotland) Bill, then Siobhan McMahon has questions on barriers and statutory rights.

Marco Biagi: As I am sure the witnesses are aware, the Children and Young People (Scotland) Bill proposes to increase the provision of early years education from 475 hours a year to 600 hours. How will that help?

Jackie Brock: We are gathering responses from our members. Overall, the members that are represented here strongly welcome the First Minister's significant commitment to childcare, initially with the 600 hours. Substantial investment is going into that. He also said clearly at the most recent party conference that his long-term vision is transformation. That is being echoed by the other political parties, which is great.

Our members have a rather lukewarm view on the 600 hours and the contribution that it will make to that long-term vision. That is partly related to the issues that we have talked about today. Substantial investment is going into the increase from 475 to 600 hours but, with all due respect, it is a very small amount of money if we look at the totality—the billions that are being spent. Many of our members would say that they could think of better ways of improving children's outcomes with the £80 million contribution than increasing the hours from 475 to 600.

Marco Biagi: Such as?

Jackie Brock: One strong demand is for greater priority for vulnerable children at a younger age. Other suggestions would be to look at the additional needs of children with disabilities, and to have a greater take on the needs of the socio-deprived rather than a universal offer. Other members feel strongly that a universal offer is the only way forward and that it is inappropriate to target. The issue of the increased hours has caused a lot of discussion and concern. Nevertheless, overall, we feel that we should move to that. It will be great to get 15 hours extra a month—it is welcome and it will be high quality. However, it is seen as a small step.

Marco Biagi: I saw heads nodding at different points there, so clearly there are diverse views.

The Convener: I bring in Maggie Simpson, followed by Satwat Rehman, Claire Telfer and Clare Simpson—so everybody.

Maggie Simpson: I will look at the issue from the perspective of childminding and what our

members are saying. If the 600 hours are to be simply an extension of the existing local authority nursery provision, our members would be concerned, because they will lose work out of that. If businesses are not as viable as they would like to be, they will find that they will lose business as a result.

The Government is, of course, looking for flexibility with the 600 hours, and it is now talking about early learning and childcare, not just pre-school education. The debate about how that will be provided in practice is still going on. We are part of the early years sub-group that is looking at that specifically, so we are included in the discussion, which is good, but I still worry about how that will be delivered in practice and whether the investment will really improve things for children or for working parents. At its best, what has been proposed is a move towards a more universal supported childcare system, which we would like, but I do not think that childcare is being looked for with that 600 hours.

Satwat Rehman: Maggie Simpson has covered some of the points that I wanted to talk about.

One Parent Families Scotland is one of the members of Children in Scotland that advocate universal services. As a result, we welcome the increase in hours and the flexibility. That is a first step, and it is one of many steps that we need to take to get the childcare infrastructure that we have talked about.

In any universal service, we would like greater investment in targeting those who might be at the greatest risk of not achieving what they should achieve and having the poorest outcomes. Work has been done to try to give flexibility to allow parents to work and to try to increase the number of children's pre-school hours. I am not sure whether the infrastructure exists to be able to provide the flexibility and what is required for children to achieve the outcomes. We do not want a system in which a parent is told that they can have flexibility, but that means that they will have provision from either 8 o'clock until 1 o'clock or 1 o'clock until 6 o'clock. Many providers will grapple with that because, if they are asked to provide their hours more flexibly, that will increase their costs because of the staffing levels that they will need.

The area is complex, but the principle of trying to balance parental employability and outcomes for children is right, and we would like it to be carried forward. However, I am concerned that families will end up having to put together their own patchwork to get flexibility and to be able to make the most of the hours. In our submission to the consultation on the bill, we said that brokerage services need to be in place to enable parents to

put together the offer in the way that best suits their child and themselves.

Claire Telfer: Satwat Rehman has covered much of what I was going to add.

Save the Children welcomes the additional hours as a step towards a more universal system. The hours and the balance in supporting children's outcomes are positive. The flexibility part is one of the key elements, and it could make the difference to the issue that the committee is considering about women's work.

A strong message on nursery hours from parents to whom we spoke last year was that they wanted much more flexible delivery to give them the opportunity to take up training and employment. The additional hours might be incremental at this stage, but they will have a slight impact on costs for parents of children of the ages that we are talking about. Therefore, they are certainly a step in the right direction.

We have talked about a longer-term approach, which we all endorse. We would like the shift to be a bit more transformational and the state's role in that to be looked at. For example, the Danish model includes national entitlements for all parents to childcare places. The question is whether we might aspire to that in the longer term. That is one of the elements of that model that have perhaps led to a more sustainable childcare system being put in place.

Marco Biagi: Does the provision in Denmark come from municipal, state or private sources, or from a mix? Is the balance of provision different from here?

Claire Telfer: I am not an expert, but my understanding is that the Danish Government funds about a quarter of childcare places, and the rest is made up from local taxation. An element of that comes from parental fees, which are capped at a certain level. My understanding is that funding is provided mostly by the state, but there is still a mixture.

Maggie Simpson: It is mostly funded by the state, but Denmark has a different system in that the state often employs childminders, rather than childminders being self-employed.

One good outcome of the changes that we have discussed is that, while the current system mostly involves local authority nurseries or private nurseries providing the required number of hours, there is now a move towards looking at using childminding services and matching the outcomes from the current regulatory system to the outcomes that are provided under the education system. Those would appear to be very similar, so why should we not match them up and allow parents more flexibility and choice?

Jackie Brock: In the context of the Children and Young People (Scotland) Bill, and echoing Claire Telfer's point about the engagement of significant policy agendas, there is an energy coming through on the early years front in particular. That is partly a result of the bill and the political interest, but it also comes from initiatives and policy developments such as the early years collaborative, which is leading to a lot of activity at national and—crucially—local level.

We have had concerns about previous incarnations at a local level, such as childcare partnerships, which sought to harness that plurality of provision. Those are a mixed picture, but they have certainly fallen into abeyance. However, the principle of working together across sectors is being revived, and has been given a real energy and boost by the early years collaborative and the flexibility provisions in the Children and Young People (Scotland) Bill, which can only be welcome.

An holistic view is being taken to improve children's outcomes from pre-birth to the early years. As we have consistently said, we would like that approach and philosophy to be applied to childcare beyond the early years and well into adolescence.

The Convener: We move to Siobhan McMahon, who has a question on statutory rights and barriers.

Siobhan McMahon: A number of the witnesses state in their submissions that childcare should be a statutory right. Should it be? How would you describe that right? Sometimes, people talk about having statutory rights for one thing, while others think of something else. It would be helpful to know what you think of that.

Jackie Brock: We can consider the variety of models that the committee has already heard about, such as that in Denmark, but we would want to look at something that suits Scotland. We need to consider the current landscape. For example, there could be a recognition in curriculum for excellence that children from the age of three should be learning through play, and that parents should expect a certain entitlement around their learning and development.

We can also look at how the early years framework, which covers children from zero to eight, meshes with curriculum for excellence. Where the system works well, there is exciting thinking about early care and education, but there is a bit of a mismatch. Similarly, we must consider the way in which the health sector thinks about how to ensure that a child's health is developing well and that they are reaching certain milestones.

10:45

It is important to look at the variety of good things that happen in various chunks of a child's life in the early years, for example, but the concern is that those things do not cohere well enough. Whether a statutory right or entitlement to a good-quality care and learning experience would help the child is an issue that needs to be discussed and debated further.

Obviously, others will be more expert than I am on the rights to which parents should be entitled, but I think that the concern is about how those rights would be met. As we discussed earlier, the issue is not entirely settled. We have not discussed the issue fully with our members but, personally, I think that we need to be careful about putting things in statute before we have real clarity about what we expect on children's outcomes from the state and its various agencies, and about what parents say they need from the state as a legal duty rather than an expectation, which provides flexibility.

Clare Simpson: Originally, parents in Scotland had a right for their child to have an education—under the Education (Scotland) Act 1945, I think—but the more recent schools act made that the child's right. Scotland was quite leading in that field.

Like Jackie Brock, I think that it is worth investigating—we are not fully there yet—whether parents should have a right to childcare or whether children should have a right to early years education. The work that Save the Children has done on the educational gaps that emerge very early in children's lives, which are to do with poverty and disadvantage, and are retained throughout their life, suggest that early years education can have a major impact on narrowing that gap. That issue is worth looking at and really needs to be explored.

I cannot give a definitive answer, but I think that the issue is certainly worth considering. Although I come from a parenting organisation, we do not represent parents as such; instead, we try to represent good parenting, if you like. My personal opinion is that we should probably approach the issue more from a child's rights point of view, rather than from a parent's rights point of view.

Satwat Rehman: I will come at the issue totally differently, although I think that what both the previous speakers have said is right.

If we look at the reality of poverty and economic disadvantage and consider the oral and written evidence for today's meeting, we see that the cost and availability of childcare presents a barrier to women going into and sustaining work. That is especially the case for lone parents, which is the client group that we work with. Lone parents now

face the spectre of welfare reform—they are already being impacted by it—and they tell us that the cost and availability of childcare is one of the biggest barriers to their being able to take up work or make work pay.

Before I come on to whether childcare should be statutory, let me just quote one lone parent in Glasgow, Linda, who said:

"Money factors in right at the end. In my head its 'got to get 16hrs'"—

that is, to meet the Jobcentre Plus requirement—

"it's got to be local, fit around school hrs and then I look at the money".

Rather than look at whether the work will make her better off and support her family, she thinks only of all the conditions that have been placed on her. We could take childcare out of that equation for her.

If childcare was made a statutory service, that would ensure that there was a duty to provide sufficient childcare to enable someone like Linda to go out to work and provide for her family. At the same time, she needs to be confident about the quality of what her child is receiving. The statutory framework for childcare needs a short-term aspect and a long-term aspect. In the short term, the provision needs to support the parental employability agenda. In the long term, we need to improve the outcomes and reduce some of those gaps that result from disadvantage and poverty. For me, we need a sort of statutory framework at national and local level so that, in times of reduced financial investment in services, childcare provision is not the first thing to go.

The Convener: Does anyone else want to come in on that point?

Irene Audain: For us, regulation of childcare provision is about children's rights to access play and care and learning services, and parents' rights to be supported in bringing up their children through access to services that cover their children's different ages, stages and needs.

Every family and child is unique. In our out-of-school care we provide places not just for the children of working parents, but for children who are vulnerable and need extra support. At an event a couple of days ago, I met a colleague from another organisation who told me about a kinship carer—an 80-year-old grandmother—who is looking after six-year-old twins as well as her adult child. I suggested that we and that organisation should find some way of getting together and finding an out-of-school care place for those twins in order to give that grandmother a break. That community should have linked-up services; indeed, I think that this should all be linked to getting it right for every child.

At least the Children and Young People (Scotland) Bill is taking a children's rights approach, which is a good thing and should be built on. With that and the early years collaborative, a lot of exciting work is going on, but it should all lead on to the later years and school-age children who are in need. We hope that there will be a lot of discussion and debate about how childcare will be brought in as a right for parents, children and communities and that our contributions this morning have helped in that respect.

Maggie Simpson: I agree with Irene Audain and the other two speakers. Having a range of services will be important, because the worry is that the statutory right will start to become limiting. We do not want to reduce the types of services that are available, because we have to look at a child's needs and, indeed, how they will benefit from being in a particular service. Likewise, childminding services are increasingly being used to support vulnerable families and their children. That is a positive move, because it means that support is available; it also represents a much more universal approach to families in need, because it concentrates not on a particular postcode or on income, but on families and their needs. That range of services has become really important; if we do not have it, we will be limiting the options for some vulnerable families and what is available as statutory provision.

Jackie Brock: Our membership includes local authorities and health boards. I come back to the inevitable use of the discretionary versus statutory measure as a way of deciding what services will be cut from hard-pressed local government budgets. Two weeks ago, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation issued a report on five authorities that use that measure for cutting services—the services that were cut were discretionary, as indeed are the vast majority of the services that we are discussing.

That is not a criticism of local authorities. We are all working with dedicated and gifted professionals who are seeing their services being decimated and who are in fear of being in the front line of cuts over the next few years. Setting the financial cost to one side, I think that creating a statutory right is a way—of course, a crude way—of protecting some services. We certainly need to acknowledge the pressures that our local authority colleagues are under and to be concerned about the future of those services over the next few years while they remain discretionary.

Siobhan McMahon: That was helpful; thank you. One of the things that came out of the briefings with Working Families and One Parent Families Scotland was the impact on the provision of childcare for disabled children and their families.

We heard earlier that the cost of adequate provision is higher for them than for other families. What can carers and the Government do to improve provision for disabled children and their families? Are there examples or models in Europe or elsewhere in the world that the committee can look at?

Satwat Rehman: I will start with an answer to your first question and hope that my colleagues around the table know more about what is going on in Europe and elsewhere.

When we talked about costs, the Working Families witness spoke about childcare costing three times as much for a disabled child. I wanted to ask who bears that cost; surely it is not right for the parents to have to bear that cost. We should be looking at how the state provides support or subsidy to make that place accessible and that experience suitable for a disabled child.

I worked in early years previously and we had a pilot project that looked at appropriate access to childcare for disabled children. Within One Parent Families Scotland, a higher number of lone parents have a disability or look after a child who has a disability and in that group we find high levels of unemployment, poverty and underemployment. Some families with a child who has a disability might feel more comfortable working in a job that they could walk away from easily or that might be more flexible, and a job that does not in any way reflect their experience or professional background.

It is more expensive to provide childcare for disabled children. In certain situations, two members of staff might go in to support a family that has a child who has a disability but we would also identify subsidies that are available to support that family so the cost of that childcare is not passed on to the family.

When we are looking at services for disabled children and childcare for children who have disabilities or additional needs, we need to recognise that staff training and adaptations might need to be paid for. Those costs need to be absorbed and not passed on to the family. It might not be called discrimination in legislation, but it feels morally wrong if putting childcare in place for families who have a disabled child is another barrier.

Clare Simpson: Satwat Rehman said that it might not be discrimination legally—

Satwat Rehman: I do not know whether it is.

Clare Simpson: It might not be, but sometimes it is under the Equality Act 2010 and the additional support for learning legislation.

I quote the anecdotal case of a friend who lives in a neighbouring local authority area and was

trying to get her child, who has a number of disabilities, into a play scheme over the summer holidays. She is a professional and articulate person who knows her rights and she took up the issue under the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2009 and got the support that enabled her son to go to the summer school play scheme and get one-to-one care.

People have rights that could be used to get provision, but they are not being used. Some providers might not be aware of them, so perhaps the Scottish Government could do more to promote those rights.

Maggie Simpson: There are certainly cases in which childminders are looking after children who have additional support needs or disabled children. The problem is that there is a lack of consistency. The childminder, as a sole provider, has to work out whether they can provide the service to that child while maintaining the quality of service that they provide to the other children whom they are looking after. Often that works extremely well and, ironically, the childminders might not charge any more because it is just one child and they are just taking up one place. It depends on the individual childminder and they should be able to make the decision about whether they are capable of providing the service. The problem is the lack of consistency—that service cannot be guaranteed throughout Scotland because it depends entirely on whether the individual childminder feels able to provide it.

11:00

Jackie Brock: Since the Children (Scotland) Act 1995, there has been improvement for disabled children as a result of the statutory entitlement under the children in need provisions. When a child has a disability, the local authority will often assess that the child is in need, so there is a route to additional support.

The problem for a local authority in taking on that statutory entitlement is that it is also subject to the market—to what is available. It can work well, but the level of availability may well hinder provision of the full range of support. Even if the local authority could afford it and would like to do it, it simply might not be available. Also, of course, in the application of the definition of children in need, there are inevitably different thresholds and definitions in different local authorities. There is an awful lot to be proud of in Scotland, but unfortunately it is pretty mixed.

With regard to education, Clare Simpson touched on the additional support for learning legislation. There is a cultural issue around our schooling system, which is about our commitment to inclusion in Scotland. As a parent, I feel that my

children have benefited from a very inclusive approach in our schools to having a broad representation of our children in the community, including those with additional support needs. However, the additional help that those schools can provide to ensure that children with additional support needs can experience a mainstream education is also under threat with regard to classroom assistants, for example, and the ability to afford the increased accessibility that is required for participation in after-school clubs.

There is a lot that is positive, but we need to be wary about the potential dangers for children with additional support needs because of some of the cuts that are inevitably under way.

Siobhan McMahon: Is anyone aware of any examples, or of any other country that we could look at?

Satwat Rehman: I do not know whether this is a good example or a bad one, but in my previous role in London for a London local authority, we had one of the pilots that looked at ways of making childcare accessible for children with disabilities and we got into a debate with the Westminster Government about the best way to do that. We argued—again, very strongly—for a supply-side subsidy, where the places and the staff were made available by putting in the support for the supply side. The Government was looking at an increase in the tax credit allowance for families where there was a child with a disability, which would allow childcare providers to charge more for those places. We argued that a higher charge for the same service could be challenged under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. It never went to court so we will never know whether that would have been the case.

There were 10 pilots and we all looked at different ways of supporting children with disabilities. Overwhelmingly, what came out of the evaluations of the overall project was that you need to look at a supply-side subsidy to make those places more accessible but that you also need to ensure that the staff and the equipment—if they are required—are there. It still gives the parent an element of choice—they can say, “I still want my child to go to my local community childminder or to my local community nursery,” and it is then the local authority’s obligation to look at making that place accessible.

Jackie Brock: It is important to point out that we have several visits a year from others in Europe who come to us for examples of good practice. For children with additional support needs, we are a world leader in terms of our progressive approaches, in particular around inclusion. On the most recent couple of visits that we have organised, we have seen the increasing development of having primary, secondary and

special schools on one campus. That is not common and people are very excited about that.

We fall down on the ad hoc nature of provision; people elsewhere are quite surprised by that. Although there are strong regional approaches in many European countries, people are surprised by the different stories in Scotland, which depend on geographical location. The lack of an overall strategic approach, whether national or local, surprises them, given how much good local practice there is.

Siobhan McMahon: I was surprised at one part of the Children in Scotland briefing, which said:

“fathers are more likely to be employed than men without children.”

Are there reasons for that? Has research been done to explain that? If it has, could the committee get the links, or whatever it may be, to it?

Jackie Brock: I will look at the sources and come back to you with some of the detail.

Siobhan McMahon: That would be helpful. Thank you.

The Convener: I have a question specifically for Maggie Simpson and Irene Audain. We have heard a lot of evidence about occupational segregation and the lack of men in caring professions. How many men are childminders and how many men work in out-of-school care? Are you actively encouraging men into the professions?

Maggie Simpson: I am sure that you know the answer.

The Convener: I still need to ask the question.

Maggie Simpson: I know.

A handful of men are registered as childminders. However, a lot of men are the partners of registered childminders and play an active part in the childminding service. They do not appear to be part of the service, but they certainly are. In many cases—increasingly so—they are registered on the childminder certificate as assistants. More dual childminding services are being provided and a lot of men who are partners play an active part. That is an important part of the service, because children see those male role models. Older children come in, as well.

Are we actively doing something about it? There are some attempts. They really are attempts, because it is still the case that not only are men not necessarily keen to come in, but society is not quite ready for it. There is still a lot of suspicion about men by themselves in childcare for young children. It is not just a recruitment issue; it is more about how men in childcare are viewed.

Irene Audain: Compared with the rest of the childcare and early learning workforce, there are slightly more men in out-of-school care. We do an annual workforce survey, and 8 per cent of the returns are from men. I think that there are more men because the children are a bit older and men might come from a youth work background. We definitely want to see more men helping to provide the service in out-of-school care.

Men are also involved by being on management committees alongside women. More than half of the stand-alone childcare services are run in the third sector. Over the past seven or eight years, more and more men have been involved in the committees, which I quite like to see. Rather than going to the out-of-school care committee and working with a group of women, I see that fathers are much more involved in discussions about the quality of care for their children. I would like to see more of that.

Marco Biagi: My question follows on very well from that. Fundamentally, how much of the problem for women in work arises from outdated and imbalanced perceptions of gender roles that see women as the sole, automatic carer for children?

Clare Simpson: I am sure that everyone has something to say on that. It is a huge part of the problem. When you look at the European models and Children in Scotland's briefing, you see that where men and women are more equal in the workforce, that tends to be because childcare is better. Even when women go out to work, there is an assumption—we have already touched on this—that childcare is a woman's responsibility. That has to shift, in terms of both responsibility and how the cost is calculated, as Sarah Jackson said.

Parts 6, 7 and 8 of the United Kingdom Children and Families Bill cover employment rights with regard to parental leave and flexible working, including paternity leave. The Equality and Human Rights Commission report said that where paternity leave is dedicated to fathers and is paid, and where fathers have a specific right to such leave, it tends to be taken. That is the case in Norway and Denmark, for example.

The UK Government has elected to go for a shared system of leave. The bill is going through Parliament, so it is not entirely clear how that will work. There is a huge amount of complexity in the consultation on how the regulation and guidance will work. However, it seems that we will be left with a system that is half best. The father will possibly get a little bit of extra leave, and that will depend on whether he is the main earner in the family. If we were to go for a better system of paternity leave—it seems funny to be talking about that when we are discussing women and work—it

might address some of the equality gap that exists. It might encourage men to take responsibility for childcare and allow them to take time off with their children.

Satwat Rehman: I endorse that. One of the models that is worth looking at—if I am getting this right—is Iceland. Leave might be shared, but both partners in a relationship are obliged to take it. A report that I read a while ago said that that system really influenced equality in the workplace and reduced the gender imbalance in relation to who takes leave.

There is a role for legislation in changing behaviours and shifting the culture. We need to address that, because until we have a change in culture, childcare will always be seen as the woman's responsibility.

Clare Simpson: Working Families, which gave evidence earlier, has an awards system for family-friendly working practices. One award is for practices that are specifically father friendly. I point that out because one of the winners in recent years was Registers of Scotland. It would be interesting to find out what impact that has had on employment, occupational segregation and retention in that organisation.

Claire Telfer: We often categorise different groups of people in relation to employment. The committee's inquiry is focusing on women and work, and there are policies that address youth employment. We perhaps need to think about the family unit, to pick up on what has been said. We need to look at family employment and how families are supported. It is important that we look at how the whole family unit impacts on children, and take a more holistic approach rather than breaking people down into individual categories. That could help us to think through what needs to be put in place.

The Convener: As members have no further questions, I thank our panel of witnesses for coming this morning. Your evidence will help us as we progress our inquiry into women and work.

11:14

Meeting suspended.

11:19

On resuming—

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener: Under agenda item 2, does the committee agree to consider its draft report on women and work in private at future meetings?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Witness Expenses

11:20

The Convener: Agenda item 3 is on inquiry witness expenses. In line with usual practice, members are invited to delegate to me as convener responsibility for arranging for the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body to pay under rule 12.4.3 any witness expenses for its inquiry into women and work. Are we agreed?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Draft Budget 2014-15

11:20

The Convener: Agenda item 4 concerns our scrutiny of the draft budget 2014-15. A paper has been circulated to members, and the committee is asked to consider three options for responding to the Finance Committee. What are members' views on the option that we should pursue?

Siobhan McMahon: I am fairly relaxed about the options, although my preference would be the first. However, is there some way in which we can show our frustration that at times this kind of scrutiny, particularly with other parliamentary committees, has been something of a tick-box exercise? I know that we discussed some of the responses that we received about our scrutiny of the previous budget. I am not sure whether this is possible but I wonder whether we can make space in our response to refer to that issue. I do not want to make a huge point of it—I simply want to highlight it for others to note.

The Convener: I would also choose the first option set out in paragraph 8 of the paper for much the same reason that Siobhan McMahon has highlighted. I do not wish equality simply to become a tick-box exercise and I think that the first option gives us a bit more influence over or input into how equality is viewed. Nevertheless, I am keen to hear other members' views.

Alex Johnstone: I am inclined to agree for the reasons that you have set out, but the problem with taking this route is that it becomes almost a "How long is a piece of string?" issue. Given that our focus on the matter could be as big or as small as we want, we would have to be very clear and concise about our objectives before we went into it. After all, if we are not careful, things could just grow and grow without our delivering very much at the end.

Marco Biagi: I agree that the equality statement is a result of a process that has been mainstreamed into decision making. As long as we strike the right balance, I think it reasonable to seek an update on the matter.

John Finnie: I agree with that approach, not least because I think that it would enhance the status of the equality statement, if that is to be the focus of our inquiry.

The Convener: Does either Dennis Robertson or John Mason wish to comment?

Dennis Robertson: I simply endorse those comments.

The Convener: Do we agree that in our response to the Finance Committee we will follow the first option in paragraph 8?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: Excellent. Thank you very much. That concludes today's meeting. Our next meeting, which is on Thursday 9 May, will include further oral evidence on women and work.

Meeting closed at 11:23.

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