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Official Report

EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE

Thursday 5 March 2015

Session 4

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EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE
4th Meeting 2015, Session 4

CONVENER

*Margaret McCulloch (Central Scotland) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Sandra White (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Christian Allard (North East Scotland) (SNP)
*Jayne Baxter (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
*John Finnie (Highlands and Islands) (Ind)
Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con)
*John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Anela Anwar (Roshni)
Annabel Goldie (West Scotland) (Con) (Committee Substitute)
Susan Hunter (YouthLink Scotland)
Brandi Lee Lough Dennell (LGBT Youth Scotland)
Pauline McIntyre (Office of Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People)
David Milliken (Home-Start)
Heather Noller (Carers Trust Scotland)
Kayleigh Thorpe (Enable Scotland)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Ruth McGill

LOCATION

The James Clerk Maxwell Room (CR4)

Scottish Parliament

Equal Opportunities Committee

Thursday 5 March 2015

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:02]

Age and Social Isolation

The Convener (Margaret McCulloch): Welcome to the fourth meeting in 2015 of the Equal Opportunities Committee. I ask everyone to set any electronic devices to flight mode or to switch them off.

I will start with introductions. We are supported at the table by the clerking and research staff, official reporters and broadcasting services, and around the room by the security office. I also welcome the observers in the public gallery. We have received apologies from Alex Johnstone, and I welcome Annabel Goldie to the meeting as his substitute.

I am the committee's convener, and I ask members to introduce themselves.

Sandra White (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): Good morning. I am the MSP for Glasgow Kelvin.

Jayne Baxter (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I am a Mid Scotland and Fife MSP.

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

Annabel Goldie (West Scotland) (Con): I am a West of Scotland MSP—and I should point out that I am not Alex Johnstone.

John Finnie (Highlands and Islands) (Ind): Madainn mhath. Good morning. I am a Highlands and Islands MSP.

Christian Allard (North East Scotland) (SNP): I am a North East Scotland MSP.

The Convener: Our only agenda item today is evidence taking from two panels of witnesses for our inquiry into age and social isolation. Before I ask the witnesses to introduce themselves, I would like to give everyone the following definition of social isolation, because when we held informal meetings, we found that there was some question about that. The term

> "could be defined as an objective, measurable state of having minimal contact with other people, such as family, friends or the wider community. Whilst it might be possible to measure social isolation, the feelings of loneliness are personal and individual. For some people, it may not be the number of contacts that is important, but the nature of those contacts, including who they are, the length of time spent, or the activity."

I welcome to the meeting our first panel of witnesses. Please introduce yourselves and outline the work of your organisations and any current projects.

Susan Hunter (YouthLink Scotland): First of all, I thank the committee for inviting us back. I am the senior policy and research officer with YouthLink Scotland, which is the national agency for youth work. We are a membership organisation with more than 100 members representing the interests of the voluntary and local authority statutory sectors for youth work in Scotland.

Brandi Lee Lough Dennell (LGBT Youth Scotland): Thank you for inviting LGBT Youth Scotland to give evidence today. We are the largest youth and community-based organisation for LGBT people in Scotland, and we focus largely on LGBT young people. We do so in a variety of ways such as supporting professionals to understand the needs of LGBT people and providing youth groups and national participation projects for LGBT young people.

Kayleigh Thorpe (Enable Scotland): I am the campaigns and policy manager at Enable Scotland, which is the charity of and for people with learning disabilities. We have more than 5,000 members and a very strong voluntary network of 44 branches across Scotland, and we work with young people through various projects, including employment projects, that I would be happy to talk to the committee about.

The Convener: Thank you very much.

What do you think are the causes of social isolation or loneliness among young people? What effect do you think that social isolation or loneliness has on the young people concerned in the short and long term? Is there an understanding of the impact of social isolation in the third sector and among service providers such as health and social work services? Are they aware of the issue?

I have condensed three questions into one. If you cannot remember them, I will be happy to go over them. The first one was about the causes of social isolation. If you want to deal with the other ones as well, I am happy for you to do so.

Susan Hunter: From our perspective—I am sure that the committee shares this view—social isolation is quite a complex issue. From our experience, we consider social isolation to be both cause and effect. Social isolation might cause further barriers to young people's participation in their community, but it might also be a symptom of other barriers that are already in place such as those to do with mental health, rurality or poverty. We need to think about the issue in that cyclical way and recognise that social isolation can take various forms and that it will affect different young people in different ways.

As for its causes, unemployment could cause a disconnection from relationships, as could family breakdown, relocation as a result of housing issues such as short tenancies and leaving school with a low level of qualifications or none at all. We need to recognise that although not all of those things will necessarily cause social isolation, they might be risk factors in young people experiencing it.

The Convener: What effect does such isolation have on the young people you work with? What do you see happening to them?

Susan Hunter: The members in our membership organisation work with young people on a daily basis, and their experience is that social isolation has an effect on young people's confidence, their self-belief, their anxiety levels, their ability to know that services are there for them and their ability to meet people for the first time.

Youth work is all about relationships. We have a network of youth workers and volunteers who, at heart, want to build good relationships with young people, but we are acutely aware that young people might find that initial step of making a new relationship extremely challenging. Youth work has the ability to be adaptive and innovative and to work with the young person as an individual, and we have examples of projects that start off with one-to-one work before moving to a wider group situation.

The Convener: Are your volunteers and workers aware that people could be feeling isolated as well as having other problems? For example, they might have moved into a new area, they might be unemployed or they might have mental health issues. Social isolation will also have an impact on them.

Susan Hunter: I think that members of our workforce are aware of the need to look at young people's wellbeing in its fullest sense, and they know that isolation might be part of that landscape for a young person. They also know that, although a young person might present with a particular problem, there might be other underlying causes.

The issue is certainly on people's radar. We have examples that I can share with the committee of practice that has been designed to address social isolation. There are national and local initiatives the focus of which is to ensure that young people are included and involved, because there is an awareness that there will be barriers in place that prevent that.

The Convener: And you will be able to send us examples of those initiatives.

Susan Hunter: Yes. We will include those in our submission, and perhaps I can share some of them with the committee during this morning's conversation.

The Convener: Thank you. Would anyone else like to comment?

Kayleigh Thorpe: I am really glad that the committee has come out with a clear definition of social isolation. Within that, I would highlight the quality of contact. Although many young people with learning disabilities have a lot of people in their lives, they are often people who are paid to be there; indeed, according to studies and statistics, up to a third of people with learning disabilities have no contact with friends.

I would echo the point that there is a catch-22 situation with regard to the causes of social isolation. Communities can be quite non-inclusive to people with learning disabilities; services are not accessible to them, and youth services are not necessarily adapted to meet their needs. People have negative experiences in their communities—they are stigmatised and marginalised—with the effect that they do not want to go out and take up social opportunities. That is what I mean by a catch-22 situation; social isolation blocks opportunities to meet new people.

I also echo the point about employability. There is an extremely low level of employment among people with learning disabilities. Employment provides an opportunity to make friends, but the employment rate for people with learning disabilities is about 7 per cent.

School should also provide an opportunity for people to make friends, because that is where people gain the soft skills that help them make friends in future and get into employment. For young people with learning disabilities, though, simply being in the classroom does not necessarily mean that they are included; in fact, studies have shown that young people with learning disabilities are twice as likely to be excluded by their peers in school. Further, special educational needs schools might be outwith someone's local area, which means that the person will have no connection to young people in their local area unless interventions are made. I can give the committee a lot more statistics.

Sandra White: I have a small supplementary question. Is access, including transport access, to cafes, pubs and cinemas still a barrier for someone with a disability? Even now, disabled toilets can be used for buckets and mops.

Kayleigh Thorpe: Absolutely. I am glad that you reminded me of that point. Access is a real issue. Although young people with learning disabilities do not necessarily have a physical disability, there are still barriers to being accepted and feeling welcomed and there are still issues to do with other young people understanding their

condition, why they behave in certain ways or why they might need extra support. In a study that we carried out with 120 young people, 41 per cent said that they did not attend clubs, because such venues were not suitable for them or because they had been picked on, and 22 per cent said that they would not make friends there. Those barriers as well as the physical barriers—in other words, the access issues—are of concern.

Transport provides an opportunity for people to get out and meet friends, especially if their friends are from other geographical areas, but people with learning disabilities face challenges with using public transport. With buses, for example, there are challenges such as the provision of accessible information, and young people find it a challenge to understand the timetable or to feel confident that they have the right money and are getting on the right bus. Moreover, public transport is a known bullying hot spot. Many of our members have been targeted with verbal abuse on public transport, and bus drivers have not intervened. After such negative experiences, a young person will not travel by bus in future. I am happy to share some suggestions on how we might improve that situation.

The Convener: I would appreciate that. I find what you have said really quite sad.

Brandi Lee Lough Dennell: I am glad that I have come third, because I am able to echo what the others have said so far about discrimination and the cause and effect aspect of isolation. Kayleigh Thorpe talked about the exclusion of young people. There are three top issues for LGBT young people, the first of which is awareness of their rights and whether they are aware that they have the right to education that is free from bullying, that they have rights under hate crime legislation and that they should be safe on public transportation. Many LGBT young people are not aware of those things.

09:15

Secondly, they experience high levels of discrimination in education and in their community, and they do not feel safe on public transportation. Indeed, I have statistics for experiences of bullying, of not feeling included in the community and of not feeling safe on public transportation.

The third issue is appropriate socialisation opportunities. This has already been hinted at; as Kayleigh Thorpe has made clear, young people who feel excluded from their peers and isolated are not going to feel sufficiently confident to access a service or opportunity. As they already feel that they are experiencing discrimination, they do not want to expose themselves to more. In short, awareness of rights, discrimination and appropriate opportunities are all issues.

With the appropriate opportunities come issues that have financial ramifications. We know that LGBT young people who are over 18 feel that they have far more opportunities to socialise where they can safely be out about their sexual orientation or gender identity than LGBT young people under 18 do. However, that socialising has financial implications, because it involves going to commercial venues such as pubs and clubs. As a result, young people from areas of social deprivation and indeed rural areas are not going to have such opportunities.

I can go further into those areas if the committee would like further information on them.

The Convener: Yes, please. Thank you very much. John Mason will now ask a few questions.

John Mason: Good morning. Between you, you represent quite a range of services out there in the community. All committee members are probably aware of a variety of services that are available in our constituencies. My first question is whether there are enough services, and my main question is whether young people who need or want assistance are aware of the services? How do you get in touch with them? If they were in touch with a professional such as a teacher, would the professional be aware of your services? Generally, is there awareness of all that is available out there and are people using it or is there a problem in that regard?

Kayleigh Thorpe: On whether there are enough services, you will probably hear about a lot of examples of services that provide positive interventions and social opportunities for young people. However, there is a postcode lottery in that respect because of the services' dependence on funding. Local authorities often fund services to do something in a particular area, as does the Big Lottery Fund. There can be a really good service, but the problem will be that it is available only to young people in one area. Such services can also have quite restrictive terms, such as being available only to young people up to the age of 18.

The services that are available are dependent on funding, which results in a postcode lottery. That is probably relevant to the difference between rural and urban services.

John Mason: On that point, I have visited services and been surprised that not many people attend them. Sometimes a service is not taken up, for whatever reason. Is that also an issue?

Kayleigh Thorpe: Services should probably be looked at in terms of how well they engage with young people. A service should not be funded just on the basis that it has always been funded.

Services have to be evaluated, and sometimes they need to modernise and do different things. If a service that has been doing the same thing for a long time is not being used, it is time to look at whether it needs to change, and it should be evaluated to see how well it is being taken up.

We always try to raise awareness of services that are available in local areas. We have a phone line service called Enable Direct that tries to map out not just Enable services but services that are appropriate for people across Scotland who have learning disabilities. People can phone up and speak to an adviser who knows their area and find out about the services that are available there. We try to raise awareness but I imagine that there is more to be done and that there is a way to link that to schools as well.

Susan Hunter: It is very much the case that there is a postcode lottery. In the youth work sector, which at best receives funding in a three-year cycle, some services for young people can disappear quite quickly.

The role of the professional is crucial in signposting a young person to other services. We find that in youth work. People have a youth work journey. They may have had the first point of support by attending a uniformed organisation or their local youth club, but that enables them to access other opportunities. We need to work harder at that initial engagement to show that there is an offer of universal service for every young person in Scotland. That is our ambition for youth work.

There are other factors. We need volunteers. Girlguiding Scotland has a waiting list of about 7,000 girls, because there are not enough volunteers. We need to ensure that the sector can support every young person in Scotland, if that is what they wish.

The Prince's Trust youth index research showed that 13 per cent of young people feel too anxious to leave the house, so the solution cannot always just be a physical service. Sometimes we need to look at online solutions, which I am sure that the committee will also be interested in.

Youth work can offer a personalised approach. We need to work harder as a sector so that other professionals realise that if a young person has a need, youth work can probably find a solution and offer it to that young person. Perhaps the service does not exist now, but if a need is identified and talked about, it can be met.

John Mason: Have you done any work on how young people come into a group? I suppose that everybody knows about the guides, for example, but do young people mainly hear about a group through word of mouth from friends?

Susan Hunter: Typically it is through word of mouth and networks in the local community.

John Mason: If somebody was isolated and did not have many friends, would they be less likely to hear about a service?

Susan Hunter: Yes, if there is not a more targeted approach. Services need to be smarter and more able to take such an approach. However, that is quite labour and funding intensive for organisations. It is crucial for organisations to work in partnership, and using tools such as the getting it right for every child wellbeing indicators will help to identify young people who are socially isolated. The included, respected and nurtured indicators are about relationships and connections. I hope that universal services such as health, education in schools and colleges will be able to ensure that young people can access wider services.

John Mason: Brandi Lee, are there enough services and do people know about them?

Brandi Lee Lough Dennell: People do not know about specific services; that is one issue. As you said, young people who are not well connected will not know about services that meet their need.

There is also an issue regarding mainstream services. If they are person-centred, mainstream services that focus on young people's wellbeing can meet their needs. However, mainstream services must recognise that they need to be explicit about their inclusion of particular protected characteristics. If young people do not see themselves reflected in the ways that youth groups advertise themselves, they will not access the services.

There is also an issue regarding the professionals who signpost young people to services. Often professionals think that LGBT young people need LGBT-specific services. In a lot of places in Scotland that is not an option, which means that young people are not signposted to services that could support them, such as local authority youth groups. The key thing is for the youth group to make explicit that it is inclusive of all the protected characteristics and does not accept any form of harassment or bullying, and that it will support young people to figure out their goals and activities and build friendships.

At the moment, explicit inclusion of protected characteristics in local authority youth groups is missing.

John Mason: I will use scouts and guides as an example, because they are quite big organisations. Are they inclusive but not portraying that very well, or are they not really inclusive?

Brandi Lee Lough Dennell: I do not want to guess about third sector organisations. We are a third sector organisation and so are the girl guides. We work with young people who may or may not be involved with other third sector organisations, such as the Prince's Trust. My point is that local authority public services have the responsibility to promote good relations between those who share a protected characteristic and those who do not, and some are not necessarily fulfilling that.

John Mason: I take the point that the public sector has a role to play but, given that the third sector is quite a big player in this, can you just give us an overall feeling for whether those organisations are doing well?

Susan Hunter: We see pockets of good, inclusive practice, with safe and inclusive environments and staff who ensure that every need is met, but we know that not every young person experiences that. The organisations are largely volunteer led, and the variation is down to the skills, capacity and confidence of the staff in those organisations.

The next issue of YouthLink Scotland's magazine, which is called *Link*, will focus on tackling equalities issues in youth work. Youth work is part of the offer to young people and is a place where they can talk about equalities issues and start to understand difference, their own views and—perhaps—prejudices and ways in which they can be inclusive and support their peers' development. We also need to discuss what more can be done to ensure that youth work really is for every young person in Scotland.

Some of the barriers might be there because of funding. If our facilities are not up to scratch, that is a barrier. If transport issues mean that a young person cannot get involved in youth work, that is another barrier. If a young person has a personal care need, there might not be the staffing that is necessary to meet that need.

There are certainly some inspiring examples of how barriers have been broken down. For example, organisations such as the scouts are active in hospitals and work with young people who cannot sustain their participation in their local scouting group because they suffer from a long-term illness. The approach is about being innovative.

The Convener: I welcome Anela Anwar from Roshni. She also wants to say something.

Anela Anwar (Roshni): To answer the question about the overall feeling about what is going on, I would not want to comment on statistics, and I do not work for the girl guides or the scouts, but our overall feeling is definitely that the youth work sector is not doing enough to engage with minority ethnic young people. I echo Susan Hunter's comments that resources are diminishing and, as they diminish, we are able to do less to engage with those communities that have been perceived as being harder to reach or difficult to engage.

In our experience of working with minority ethnic young people, because of those additional cultural, ethnic and religious barriers, it takes a more concerted and targeted effort to engage with those groups. That is not always done effectively by local authorities, the youth work sector or even third sector youth work organisations. We have done some work with YouthLink, YoungScot and others to try to build that bridge and close that gap, but niche organisations such as Roshni can only do so much, and mainstream organisations need to take responsibility for doing more to engage with those groups.

Work also needs to be done within communities to encourage parents to allow their young people to access those opportunities. Parents can prevent their young people from accessing opportunities that others will access. There is a perception among minority ethnic groups that the services that are available are not suitable for minority ethnic young people—"The sector is not for us"—or there is a complete lack of awareness that they exist. More needs to be done to promote services within those groups.

Annabel Goldie: I have a brief supplementary question that goes back to the point that was made by Kayleigh Thorpe, supported by Brandi Lee Lough Dennell, about public transport being a hotspot for bullying or for intimidating or unpleasant behaviour.

For example, I am aware that on trains there are notices warning passengers not to abuse staff, and I have seen something similar in hospitals. Would it be helpful if we had notices on public transport telling passengers not to abuse one another and saying that, if they do, they will be chucked off? That might give moral support to other passengers and the bus driver or train conductor.

Kayleigh Thorpe: Absolutely. Our be the change campaign specifically targeted public transport. We spent a lot of our budget on posters on trains and buses. The point of that was to spread awareness that it is not acceptable to use abusive language against people who have learning disabilities. The intention was to get people to rethink their actions, challenge their behaviours and step up and challenge other people's behaviours. However, that cost a lot of money and we could only target certain areas. It would be more efficient if Transport Scotland or the transport providers took forward that initiative.

09:30

Annabel Goldie: Were you able to assess whether there was a consequence to putting up the posters?

Kayleigh Thorpe: We are in the middle of evaluating that, and we have had some really good feedback in a survey in which 97 per cent of people said that it is absolutely right for Enable Scotland to challenge those behaviours in that way; 64 per cent said that it made them think differently; and 64 per cent also said that they felt more confident about challenging other people who used such language.

Annabel Goldie: Could that information be shared with the committee?

Kayleigh Thorpe: Absolutely, yes.

Sandra White: I raised the issue of social media at the outset and I noticed that Susan Hunter mentioned online solutions. Social media is used by young people and by lots of others as well. In your opinion, can it be used to combat loneliness and isolation? We have heard witnesses say that it is a positive tool, but others have said that it causes more bullying. What are your thoughts on that, and what do your organisations do to promote social media as a positive tool?

Susan Hunter: YouthLink Scotland is a strong proponent of using social media and digital tools for including people. We worked in partnership with other organisations to produce what we call digitally agile national principles, and we laid out a set of principles around how digital tools can be used for inclusive practice. One of those principles is that we will be supported through enhanced use of digital technology and social media, and that our use of digital technology and social media will be accessible, inclusive and driven by the needs of learners and communities.

We set that out when we launched those principles last November, during national youth work week, and they are for all community learning and development practitioners, not just for the youth work sector. However, we know that youth work is evolving and developing services online, and Brandi Lee Lough Dennell will be able to tell you about the excellent work that LGBT Youth Scotland has done in that area. Organisations such as the Royal National Institute of Blind People, with its haggeye youth forum, are using platforms such as Facebook, and because of the technologies that allow text-to-speech or magnification, they have been able for the first time to connect people with sight loss or visual impairments. From that, they were able to set up a media team that meets purely online and produces its *haggazine* bulletin.

People who are in quite disconnected places but who have a common interest, cause or experience can be brought together by social media. It is not about having additional platforms, but about using the resources that are already there, many of which are free for third sector organisations, so there is quite an enablement in terms of reaching more people and for the signposting of services.

We are aware that there are risks. When we came to present to the committee on the scope of the inquiry, there were contributions from ChildLine Scotland and from the Samaritans about some of the risks of online bullying, but we consider that the bullying that happens online takes place in another place. Respect me's research shows that young people who experience online bullying normally know the person responsible. However, there is a sense in which the online virtual world is a place where people can feel quite lonely, because they can compare themselves with others, whether they are looking at true representations of people's lives or not. We have to be aware of how that space can create an impact on young people's lives, but there is real scope for opportunities to connect young people together.

Annabel Goldie: What was that RNIB initiative?

Susan Hunter: It is called haggeye, the national youth forum.

Brandi Lee Lough Dennell: I will start with a quote from a young person, from research that we did on education, health and inclusion in the community. **I**t talks about why a young person does not access a youth group and where they seek support. It is posted online through social media, and it states:

> "I do not socialise with other trans people as I don't know any that live nearby. I could attend an LGBT youth group but I have been put off by the idea as I don't really identify as a person within the 'LGBT youth', although at 24, I do fit in with the age group. I usually socialise with old friends that I have and trust, or I will socialise with the online trans community via YouTube. I do not feel comfortable meeting new people in person as it can be an extremely isolating experience when your identity is not understood."

That is the context for a lot of young people who do not come to youth groups because they lack the confidence and withdraw. We talked about that earlier.

One of the solutions that LGBT Youth Scotland has come up with is our digital youth work project, which enables young people to access our website and leave a message or email us when a youth worker is not logged in. Several times a week, several youth workers log in to the online web chat and have one-to-one chats with young people. The young people come from across the country and from other countries as well, because the service fills gaps where they do not have

access to such a service. It began in September 2012 and the top issues raised are coming out as LGB or T; difficulties at school such as bullying or general acceptance by peers; family problems; relationship problems; and finding out information about youth groups or services. The service has grown exponentially since we started it.

Sandra White: I am sorry to interrupt, but could other groups learn from the programme that you are talking about and share the beneficial and positive aspects?

Brandi Lee Lough Dennell: We believe so. We have shared it with YouthLink Scotland.

Susan Hunter: We published a digital youth work special of our *Link* magazine. I will ensure that the committee's clerks have access to it. It is about taking away the fear and saying to youth workers, as professionals, that the online space provides an opportunity for them to connect with young people, provided that there are parameters around that. The project that LGBT Youth Scotland has set up uses a trained, qualified youth worker who communicates with the young people, which is important.

Sandra White: The young people are leading that and are putting in their comments about what they would like. It is not about their answering questions—they are putting forward their ideas.

Brandi Lee Lough Dennell: That is the second example that I want to share with you. The first example was one-to-one support. The second example is from a pilot scheme that was run in the Scottish Borders. It was recognised that it can be difficult for young people to reach a common meeting space; they might have fears about travelling on public transport because they might experience discrimination from other passengers, or they might have a problem in attending the group because they would have to leave early in order to get home that night. The pilot scheme was supported by a grant from the Scottish Borders LEADER programme and the learning was that, when a youth worker logged in to an online chat forum at a particular time and young people logged in together, the youth worker could facilitate activities in which the young people participated together. That pilot was youth led—young people said, "This is what we want to work on"—and it enabled face-to-face contact with their peers so that they could interact directly with them.

The first example shows the support that young people get out of youth work; the second shows the peer socialisation that they get out of youth work.

Jayne Baxter: I want to ask about connections. Susan Hunter said that we need to work smarter—I am a big believer in that—and Brandi Lee talked about being mindful of protected characteristics. I am mindful of the fact that we now have the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 and the GIRFEC process under which every child is meant to have a plan. Do you think that there is scope for the voluntary sector to be more engaged with the local GIRFEC child planning process? Do you think that healthcare and social work staff know enough about you to be mindful of you when they are thinking about how to plan for a child's future?

Brandi Lee Lough Dennell: Can I ask a question?

Jayne Baxter: Yes.

Brandi Lee Lough Dennell: Are you asking whether we think that they are mindful of us at the moment?

Jayne Baxter: Yes, and how can we make them more mindful if they are not.

Anela Anwar: In theory, that should work, but I do not think that it works in practice at the moment. In theory, local authorities should definitely be mindful of everyone in a child's life who can make a positive contribution, from family and community to third sector organisations. However, to go back to the point that I made earlier, at a time of diminishing resources when capacity and funding are being reduced, it is difficult for third sector organisations to take on more than they are already doing. The young people who we represent and work for still feel very disconnected from the vast majority of the youth work sector and local authority services. Those young people feel that services do not understand their needs and that they are trapped in a situation of culture clash—they feel that they do not fit in their community or in the mainstream Scottish community.

For our young people, until we can overcome those barriers and hurdles—whether the issues are real or perceived—the child's plan will go only so far. We need to encourage engagement and trust and deal with the issues that we have in Scotland with racism, discrimination, Islamophobia and the discussions around radicalisation, which are further isolating our young people rather than bringing them together. When we do that, processes such as the named person, the lead professional and the child's plan will work effectively. However, until we have a Scotland for all and one that engages all, those processes will not work.

That is definitely the opinion of the young people who we represent. We have a youth advisory panel that leads on all our youth engagement work. The panel utilises tools such as social media and does direct engagement with young people. Time and again, consultations with minority ethnic young people show that the issue is less about

process and more about engagement. It is more about those young people being able to see that services are for them, that they can engage and that the services understand their needs.

Jayne Baxter: That is a big challenge for all public sector agencies. It is good that you have got that on the record.

Susan Hunter: The partnership planning for children and young people's services is an opportunity to ensure that third sector organisations are part of the process. That is sometimes difficult, because typically those organisations are in receipt of funding from the statutory partners that are trying to create that balance of a partnership. Tensions sometimes exist around the way in which third sector organisations are recognised. One opportunity is that, in September this year, the first community learning and development plans will be published for every local authority area, which is required under a statutory instrument. The plans will identify the needs of communities and must involve consultation with community members. As Anela Anwar said, the plans will only be as good as the evidence and contribution of the partners and of young people and their families.

Come September, we will for the first time have a national picture of what is there. The plans will be published every three years, and we will see improvement over time as a result of that statutory instrument.

Brandi Lee Lough Dennell: I will build on that point about planning. It is important that local authorities, community planning partnerships and all those who are planning for services consider the needs of all the protected characteristics. Impact assessments often have a little note saying that no evidence has been found or that there is no impact, but that is not the case, because we know that there are impacts. However, year after year, those little qualifiers do not change. Therefore, research is not sought and nobody undertakes consultation with potential service users, so the gap is not being filled. That is the important element if planning for services is to have the full effect.

Kayleigh Thorpe: The Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 provides an opportunity. In the guidance that is being developed on commissioning, there is space to encourage local authorities to engage with the third sector and, when they commission children's services, to think about whether they are meeting the needs of all.

Health and social care integration is another opportunity to tackle social isolation. The strategic plans that will be developed in each local authority area should mention social isolation. That very much fits with the integration principles. We need to capitalise on all the big changes in Scotland and ensure that social isolation is a central theme throughout.

09:45

Annabel Goldie: I have a short supplementary question, and then the convener will want my proper questions.

I have found this evidence session to be extremely interesting. The broad issue of identification is the important issue. Is there a problem, and who will pick it up with early intervention following that identification?

I was struck by what you said. Some young people, obviously, are at school and the individuals who are likely to see that there is a difficulty are the teachers. To what extent do local authorities expect schools to operate within their own local authority protocols and guidelines? Do schools ask you, as third sector agencies, to go in and help a young person? Do you ever hear from a young person who says that their teacher suggested that they contact you?

Brandi Lee Lough Dennell: Yes. We receive referrals all the time. Schools sometimes refer young people; other schools contact us to say that a young person is experiencing bullying or has come out to them and they do not know how to handle it. When schools signpost young people, that is a positive thing but there is also an issue about staff confidence in dealing with the experiences of LGBT people. For the most part, schools know about us and they signpost young people to us. Is the need to immediately signpost young people outward, or to address their issues in the service that they are currently accessing? I agree that it is the latter.

Susan Hunter: The success of youth work comes through its partnerships with schools, and there are close working relationships in every local authority. Youth work also happens in schools, so we have third sector or local authority youth work staff working in schools as part of delivering the curriculum or working with individual, targeted or identified groups of young people. That relationship is strong and continually developing.

Kayleigh Thorpe: I will pick up on the point about the need to build inclusive schools. I talked earlier about children being isolated in schools and children who have learning disabilities experiencing exclusion by their peers. Enable Scotland has done a lot of research into that, particularly looking at young people in schools, and we found that schools are reluctant to talk about difference and why a person might need additional support. That puts up a barrier right away to people forming friendships because they

do not understand. A lack of understanding is a big part of bullying and exclusion.

We have been developing lesson plans with the University of Strathclyde that create an open space for young people in schools to talk about learning disability and being a friend to someone else. Those plans have had a lot of support from partners within the third sector and education.

Schools have very strict timetables and it is up to the headteacher or local authority to decide what can be fitted in. We cannot get everything into every school, so they need to think about whether there is an issue in their school. Even if there is not an issue in a school, if we want to build inclusive communities, we need to start with schools. If we build inclusive schools, our future communities will be much more accessible and inclusive.

Annabel Goldie: Thank you. I will keep this brief, convener.

The witnesses have talked about the school environment and I am interested in the health environment. A general practitioner will see a young person only if the young person goes to them. How do we identify the young person who might have issues but does not attend a GP? No one else might be going to their house. Is there a role for health visitors who might have knowledge of a broader family background and whether there are any challenges in the family and so might pick up on the young person who has difficulties?

The Convener: I am conscious that we are running short of time, so please keep your answers brief. Another two members would like to ask questions.

Anela Anwar: The short answer to the question is that there is a role for all universal services. As Annabel Goldie said, a young person might not visit their GP, but they might have contact with the health visitor. Education services have the biggest role to play with young people, because they see them day in, day out.

I echo some comments that Brandi Lee Lough Dennell made. We often get calls or referrals from schools. The issue is then whether we are reinforcing the us-and-them approach if there is not the capacity or confidence in the school to deal with the issue. We really need to look at building staff confidence in the education sector.

There is also the element of teachers and schools thinking, “How much more have we to deal with? Our role is to teach children. What else do you want us to bring together?” That is where the strong partnerships that Susan Hunter mentioned come into play. Health workers need to be aware of indicators and signs that there is an issue and know where to take and share those concerns. However, by and large, education has the biggest part to play.

Susan Hunter: There is also the role of school nurses, who provide drop-in services and have close relationships with pastoral and guidance staff in the school. There are pathways into health services for young people that might not be the GP.

Annabel Goldie: Convener, do you want me to be responsible for question 13 in our paper?

The Convener: Yes, absolutely.

Annabel Goldie: The question is on the broader issue of preventative measures, dealing with the challenges of loneliness, and how we might try to prevent loneliness from happening. We have heard about the importance of friendships at a young age and the ability to make social connections when people are young. How can those positive social connections be encouraged?

Brandi Lee Lough Dennell: I return to the Equality Act 2010. There is a role for the public services where young people spend the majority of their waking lives in education and promoting. Talking about learning disabilities, minority ethnic communities, gender identity, sexual orientation and all the particular characteristics at early stages, and about bullying and harassment; building explicitly inclusive schools and services so that they promote good relations between those who share particular characteristics and those who do not; and ensuring equality of opportunity are key.

There are several ways in which public services can do that. They can be explicit about the inclusion in their services both to their service users and potential service users with visible depictions, discussions in the curriculum and repeated and constant addressing of any sort of discrimination. I am sorry, convener; I am trying to rush. It is a matter of being explicit about inclusion.

The Convener: Kayleigh Thorpe should be brief.

Kayleigh Thorpe: There is a place to encourage positive social connections. We need to think about removing some of the barriers that have already been identified, such as transport, and about non-inclusive groups, for example. Some people whom we have talked about do not have a friend at all, so it is very difficult for them to meet another friend. They may never have had the experience of making a friend. Therefore, some people need additional support to be able to learn those soft skills. Quite a lot of the feedback that we get from people with learning disabilities is about them finding it easier to make more friends if

they have one friend. That is how friendship networks work.

We use a peer support model in some of our youth groups. Someone who has attended the youth group for a while or someone who goes to a local school will befriend someone and be a peer supporter. I emphasise that none of the youth workers allocates that peer. People are observed and it is seen which people naturally go to each other. That is how we encourage people to form friendships, which are supported in that way.

The Convener: Thank you. We are running short of time. We will now move on to Christian Allard.

Christian Allard: Thank you very much, convener. The conversation so far has been very interesting, particularly the last point about finding a friend, which I found to be very positive. We should compare that with the anti-bullying policies that we have had so far to address the person who does the bullying, the victim of it and all the others who witness it. Is there a need for that kind of communication or promotion to pinpoint our problem with social isolation for young people? Maybe promotion of the work on adopting a friend that has just been mentioned would be positive. What kind of example can we have to move forward, to take the issue away from bullying and to have something better?

Kayleigh Thorpe: A lot of the feedback that we get when we have discussions about friendship is on the importance of having a support network and how that can prevent bullying. I agree that there is a big focus on bullying. Although we need to maintain that, we also need to talk about being a friend to someone and to adopt a more positive message. That is what our be the change campaign is about. It is not about saying, "You are a bully and you must stop that"; it is more about encouraging people to think about things differently and to be nicer to other people. A positive approach needs to be taken.

Christian Allard: How can we target the hard-to-reach people who perhaps do not see themselves as being bullied? Perhaps they are not bullied, but they are socially isolated. What kind of campaign can we have? Who can best deliver it?

Anela Anwar: Peer-to-peer education has to be the way to go. It will be the most effective approach; we have certainly found that to be the case.

Social media has a part to play, but with social media we sometimes lose connections rather than build them. Young people can forget what it is like to be in the company of other young people. We need to create and develop understanding across all the protected characteristics. We need to remember what similarities we share, but we also need to celebrate difference. We should not always see difference negatively.

As I say, that education is most effectively delivered peer to peer. That is one of the best ways to tackle isolation, to stop certain young people feeling isolated or different and to help those people who are perhaps more negative and are bullying in schools or communities to be part of that change. We have definitely taken that approach.

Christian Allard: Who can deliver that?

Anela Anwar: The role of delivering peer-to-peer education programmes is for the third sector, supported by Government and local authorities.

Susan Hunter: We want young people to have opportunities to design the campaigns, too, so that they are led by the views and experiences of young people. All our organisations have a good track record of doing that. That will help young people consider this as an issue.

When we came to the project's scope, we talked about whether young people recognise loneliness as an issue and the language that they would use to articulate their feelings; they certainly would not say, "I'm a socially isolated young person". We need to consider what that means and feels like and how it is experienced on a day-to-day basis by young people, and the only people who can tell us that are the young people themselves.

Christian Allard: How do we deliver such a programme? How can local authorities, health boards and the Scottish Government make a start on it? I challenge you on whether it is a question of funding. If we give ownership to the young people, funding is perhaps less important.

Anela Anwar: The work needs to be 100 per cent youth led, but the young people need to be supported to do it. Who are those young people engaging with effectively? I would say that they are engaging effectively with third sector organisations above all. Those organisations need to be supported, so funding is definitely an issue.

I know that it might sound like a broken record for the third sector organisations to talk about the need for funding, but we want to be able to support young people to make a difference to their own lives, and we need to be supported to enable them to do that and to give those young people a voice.

John Finnie: I had a couple of questions about examples of good practice, but we have heard comprehensive responses from the panel and we have been assured that more information on those will be shared with us.

I have a point to put to Kayleigh Thorpe. If I noted you correctly, you talked about appropriate

social inclusion opportunities. I was assisting a family with a young woman with learning disabilities and mobility issues. The local authority thought it appropriate to have her socially included with a group of older people—she was literally wheeled into a room with older people. How typical is that? That young woman might have been in a room with lots of people, but she felt more isolated than ever.

Kayleigh Thorpe: That highlights the fact that inappropriate social opportunities are made available. I cannot give other examples of that off the top of my head, but I can say that people are signposted to services that are inappropriate for them. I listed some statistics earlier.

I could also mention the experience of a young woman who attended several youth groups. Her mum's feedback was that she was excluded from activities in school and in the youth group because she got very excited and upset the other children. Sometimes they did not like how she was behaving. When she started to attend Enable Scotland's youth groups, her mum kept asking, "Is it okay if she comes back next week?" That really spoke to me. Of course she could come back next week. She should be able to come back—she is a young person and it is a youth group.

I do not think that there is a place for a youth group that is just for people with learning disabilities. We want to build inclusive youth groups. All our youth groups are for people with or without learning disabilities. We encourage young people who do not have learning disabilities to attend our youth groups. That happens in other youth groups—it is not Enable Scotland's parade here. A lot of inclusive youth work is happening. That is the kind of model that we need. We need to build on that model and ensure that it is a universal service that is available throughout the country. However, a young person should absolutely not be attending an elderly group. That is just nonsense.

10:00

John Finnie: Would it be your view that that shows that there was an inappropriate needs assessment of that individual and that, in some instances, services should be exclusively individually tailored?

Kayleigh Thorpe: Absolutely.

Sandra White: I have one quick question. Carers Trust Scotland will be giving us evidence later. It has talked about the need to consult young people about the kind of online help that they want. I want a quick yes or no answer. Is that the way forward? I have listened to what you have said and you obviously consult young people and work together as a group. However, if it was not Carers Trust Scotland that was going to do that type of exercise, would other organisations do it individually or collectively? Who should ask young people for their ideas about the kind of online help that they need?

Susan Hunter: You are right. It is crucial to ask the right young people about the right issue, if that makes sense. Organisations such as Young Scot are really effective at reaching a mass population of young people from different backgrounds. That might be the most appropriate route. The Scottish Youth Parliament is another way of doing that.

It is also necessary to ask young people who use services about what more they want from those services. Such services may be best provided at the small, local and specialised level. It is not one size fits all for consultation and participation. We want to move beyond consultation and to have services that are designed and led by young people rather than ones that are proposed to them for them to comment on.

Anela Anwar: We have some large organisations in Scotland that are often used to engage with and consult young people. However, pockets of more difficult-to-reach and more isolated young people are sometimes missed from that. I echo what Susan Hunter said—we need to be really clear about the demographic that we are trying to engage and for what purpose. By working with X organisations to consult young people, are we really reaching everyone? That needs to be kept in the front of our minds when we do any youth consultation.

Christian Allard: If we have a national campaign to tackle social isolation, what should it be called? [*Laughter*.]

The Convener: I will let you think about that. Let us move on to John Mason.

John Mason: If a young person has friends in their group—for example, Enable Scotland or another group for people with learning disabilities, or the Pakistani community—but no friends outside that group, is that isolation? Is that a problem or should we not worry about that?

Anela Anwar: It is definitely a problem. As a first step, when we are trying to engage with more hard-to-reach or difficult-to-engage groups, we tend to do things in silos. Maybe that is the right way to do it. That can be a first step. Ultimately, though, we should be working towards integration—that has to be key. If we are going to move forward and have an inclusive, happy and healthy society, we need individuals to engage across the board; otherwise, we will be perpetuating the sense of isolation. I would 100 per cent say that we have to move towards integration.

The Convener: Do we have a last volunteer to answer a question?

Brandi Lee Lough Dennell: I absolutely agree.

The Convener: Everybody agrees. I will let you think about Christian Allard's question and you can email the committee.

Thank you all for your contribution. It has been very interesting. I am sorry that we do not have enough time to carry on—we are really short of time.

10:05

Meeting suspended.

10:15

On resuming—

The Convener: Again, I welcome everyone to the fourth meeting in 2015 of the Equal Opportunities Committee and remind people to set electronic devices to flight mode or the off position. My name is Margaret McCulloch and I am the committee's convener. For the benefit of witnesses, members will introduce themselves in turn.

Sandra White: I am the MSP for Glasgow Kelvin.

Jayne Baxter: Good morning. I am an MSP for Mid Scotland and Fife.

John Mason: I am the MSP for Glasgow Shettleston.

Annabel Goldie: I am an MSP for West Scotland.

John Finnie: Good morning. I am an MSP for Highlands and Islands.

Christian Allard: Good morning. I am an MSP for North East Scotland.

The Convener: I welcome the second panel of witnesses and ask them to introduce themselves. I invite them also to outline for members the work of their organisation and any current projects, please.

David Milliken (Home-Start): Good morning. I am the Scottish director of Home-Start UK. We offer a home visiting service for parents with very young children. There are various add-on services but that, in a nutshell, is what we do.

Heather Noller (Carers Trust Scotland): I am the policy officer at Carers Trust Scotland. We are Scotland's largest charity supporting carers and young carers. We provide support through a network of carers' services and young carers' services. The latter services run youth groups for young carers and provide long-term support as well.

Pauline McIntyre (Office of Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People): I am the parliamentary and policy officer at the Office of Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People. Our role is to promote and safeguard the rights of children and young people across Scotland. We work with children and young people up to the age of 18, or 21 if they have been looked after. We provide a range of services and work directly with children and young people to help them to learn more about their rights. We work with adults to help them to learn about children's rights. We carry out research and we work in schools. We also run an inquiry service whereby parents, children and young people and professionals can contact us if they have questions around children's rights. That informs some of the policy issues that we take forward.

I thank you for the opportunity to come along today.

The Convener: Thank you. For the question session, witnesses should indicate to me or the clerk on my left when they want to answer any question, and members should do the same if they have a supplementary question.

Before we start our questions, I will quote the definition of social isolation that we have put together:

"Social isolation could be defined as an objective, measurable state of having minimal contact with other people, such as family, friends or the wider community. Whilst it might be possible to measure social isolation, the feelings of loneliness are personal and individual. For some people, it may not be the number of contacts that is important, but the nature of those contacts, including who they are, the length of time spent, or the activity."

That is the definition that we have for social isolation as opposed to loneliness, which is different—a couple of you will have heard that because you were listening to the previous evidence session. From the witnesses' perspective, what are the causes of social isolation or loneliness among young people? What effect do social isolation and loneliness have on young people's mental and physical health?

David Milliken: We conducted a study on social isolation, which is one of the main factors mentioned to our co-ordinators when they visit families that have either self-referred or been referred. Because social isolation is such a big factor, we conducted a study on the families that we support. It was done in 2006, but the statistics that we have had since then suggest that the numbers are not terribly different now.

Because that was the greatest factor, we looked into it in more detail. The main issues that people

said contributed to the feelings of isolation and loneliness were to do with themselves, where they lived, health and disability issues, their children and their home. The issues to do with themselves were about a lack of confidence and self-esteem, being alone with children most or all of the time and having no family nearby. There were a number of factors to do with where they lived, such as unsafe neighbourhoods and, fairly obviously, living away from family and friends. The health and disability issues were very much about mental health problems and postnatal illnesses. The issues to do with children were about being on their own with children and having no safe place for them to play in. Those were our findings.

Social isolation is a huge factor for the families that we support. We do not have a definition of social isolation, but we allow people to say whether they feel socially isolated, and that is where we get our statistics from.

Heather Noller: Social isolation is a big issue for young carers, and that is recognised in Scotland's young carers strategy. Isolation can be a direct result of the caring role. Young people who have caring responsibilities might not have any time to spend with their friends because they spend so much time caring. A compounding issue might be that, although a young carer might have a group of friends whom they can spend time with, if their peers are not caring for someone they do not understand what a young carer's life is like. It might be difficult for a young carer's friends to understand what they are going through, which is why it is important to have specific support for young carers through groups or online services, so that they have the opportunity to meet other young carers.

Different caring roles can cause different kinds of isolation. If a young person cares for somebody who has a mental health issue or a drug or alcohol addiction, it can be difficult for them to invite friends back to the house. That is another compounding issue.

We do not have a definition of social isolation, but we know that it is a big issue for all the young carers whom we work with.

Pauline McIntyre: The issue depends very much on the individual child's or young person's perception of what makes them socially isolated. However, there are a number of key elements across the board. For many children and young people, isolation is about not being able to participate in activities with their peers because of a lack of services or a lack of support. There is an issue about standing out from their peers by being different, looking different or being perceived as different. There is an issue about not having the same opportunities as others. That may be because of a range of factors such as a disability or even poverty, which can have a massive impact.

The overarching issue for children and young people is to do with feeling powerless about what happens to them and the power imbalance between adults and children. Children and young people feel that they do not have a say in what happens to them. That is key. If we are looking at how to unpick social isolation, we need to look at how adults interact with children and young people and the contribution that children and young people can make to their own destiny, if you like.

The Convener: How far up on the radar are isolation and loneliness and the effect that they can have on people's health when third sector organisations and social services work with those groups of people? Is the issue at the forefront of those organisations' minds? Are systems in place to highlight the issues so that they are taken into account?

David Milliken: It is difficult to answer that question because, for the people who are engaged with various services, the chances are that the level of social isolation will be diminished, or we would certainly hope so. It is the people whom we do not access who are of more concern. People find it difficult to refer themselves to services. If someone feels socially isolated, it takes quite a lot of courage to come forward and say, "Hang on. I am hanging around the house with my young children and I am a wee bit scared to go out." People are scared that something will happen to them as a consequence of that, so they tend to keep it to themselves.

That is why I particularly welcome the inquiry that the committee is conducting. I think that the issue is much wider than any of the statistics that we gather, and many others are going to inform us about the silent people who feel isolated and who are not engaging.

The Convener: Some of my colleagues will probably pick up on the issue about the silent minority—or majority—of people who are out there. They will no doubt have questions to ask and will want to develop the point further. Does anyone else want to comment on that aspect?

Heather Noller: I agree with David Milliken that the hidden young carers will probably be more isolated than the ones who are attending young carers' groups, or the ones whose school or college knows that they are a young carer and can provide them with support. If the young carer is hidden and they do not get that support from school or from other agencies, there is a problem.

John Mason: Ms McIntyre used the phrase "a lack of services". Is the biggest problem a lack of services, or is it that there are services but a young carer cannot get to them? Is there a lack of

knowledge about services that are available? I suspect that it is a mixture of all three, but I am interested in where the big problems lie and what the issues are. I feel that, to some extent, a lack of knowledge of what is available out there is a big part of the problem.

Pauline McIntyre: You are right to say that it is a combination of all those factors. One of the key issues for us is whether children and young people are disproportionately affected by some of the cuts that are being made. When local authorities are looking at cutting services, are they disproportionately targeting children and young people?

We need to work with children and young people to give them the confidence to come forward if they feel that they are isolated. However, the very nature of the problem means that a child who is isolated will not feel that they can reach out. The answer to that partly involves adults having the skills to pick up on that social isolation at an early stage. The danger is that, if we do not pick up on it early, the young person's situation spirals and they end up in a much worse situation further down the line.

John Mason: Would you say that, although some young people are aware of the services, it takes someone to reach out to them to get them engaged?

Pauline McIntyre: That is a big part of it. Children and young people tend to seek out local support and go to people whom they trust. We need to have those key people in place to whom young people can choose to go. Those people can then help them to identify services that will support them.

Asking a child or young person to self-identify and then to present themselves at a service that will support them is a big challenge, particularly if the child or young person is isolated. We need to have that support network in place at a local level to help the young person to take the first step towards further support.

The Convener: Does anyone else want to come in?

John Mason: If no one does, that gives me more time to move on to the issue of geographical isolation. Some of us who live in the cities might assume that someone who lives on an island is automatically more isolated. However, the communities on some islands may be closer knit than those in some cities. How do you view the geographical side? Is isolation a problem across the country, or is there a particular problem in certain areas?

Heather Noller: I would be reluctant to describe it as a problem. Carers Trust Scotland works with around 50 young carers' services. Some of them participate in our network more than others, but there is a good geographical spread.

The problems arise in the large rural communities such as in the Highland region, where the groups for young people are concentrated in the cities and the centres of population. There are outreach projects in all the young carers' services that will do their best to reach young people where they are and work with other youth services to make those links and connections, but it is difficult.

Even in the cities and the largest centres of population, young carers' services are oversubscribed. Some of them have waiting lists, and it can be difficult to manage the sheer number of young people who want to get support from the services.

David Milliken: Our services are provided in people's own homes. We have projects in rural and urban communities, and we do not notice any difference in the level of isolation that occurs in communities of different sizes and geographic distribution.

John Mason: Are you able to give basically the same service in rural and urban areas?

David Milliken: Yes.

10:30

Pauline McIntyre: Practical factors often come into play in the rural versus urban question around isolation. An issue was raised with us recently about the transport that is provided for children and young people to enable them to attend after-school activities. Some of the local cuts meant that that service had to be reduced, which had a huge knock-on effect on the ability of children and young people in some areas to undertake after-school activities and socialise with their friends.

There are both rural and urban elements to social isolation, but what seem to be practical decisions can also have an effect on social isolation. Children and young people should be asked what is important to them. It is very clear that taking part in after-school activities helps to reduce social isolation for them, particularly if they live in a very remote area that means that going to see a friend after school is nigh-on impossible if they do not have access to public transport or get a lift from a parent.

John Mason: Do you think that the expectations of young people in rural areas are different from those of young people in urban areas?

Pauline McIntyre: I do not think that they should be. They have a right to socialise in the

way that any other child or young person would. I guess that they are realistic about the practical problems with transport. However, young people living in rural areas have the same right as those living in urban areas to expect to be able to socialise and participate in activities. The issue is about what measures can be put in place to ensure that that is possible for young people.

Annabel Goldie: This question is for Mr Milliken. What tends to trigger involvement by Home-Start in a family situation?

David Milliken: We receive 54 per cent of our referrals from health visitors, because we deal with young children. Approximately 15 per cent of referrals are self-referrals and the rest are a mixture of referrals from community psychiatric nurses, nursery schools and so on. Referrals come from anybody who notices that a family is having difficulties. That is how we tend to be involved.

Annabel Goldie: Thank you.

Sandra White: I will carry on with the social media theme. Does the use of social media by young people combat loneliness and social isolation and help them? Is social media a positive aspect of your work? We have heard about negative aspects of social media such as bullying, but the previous panel of witnesses seemed to believe that social media was a positive thing. I want to hear your views on that and about what your organisations do to promote the use of social media.

Pauline McIntyre: We do not directly deliver that kind of service. However, I think that, in general, social media contact can be exceptionally useful for children and young people, particularly for isolated young people who might want to seek support when support services are closed or, if they live in a rural area, when accessing services is difficult.

Social media can also be a useful way of providing children and young people with the ability to talk about their problems in a way that does not take control away from them. When a child or young person goes to an organisation and admits that they are having difficulties, control is often taken from them and measures are put in place, whereas the social media approach can allow them an element of control and to disclose things at their own pace.

However, there is another side to that: we need to be very careful that social media is not used to replace services on the ground and that it simply complements services that are there already. We also need to consider whether all children and young people will be able to access things easily. We recently did a report with Save the Children in which we looked at some of the difficulties that children and young people who live in poverty experience with education. One of the key issues is that laptops and iPads, which many children and young people take for granted, are not easy to access for those who live in poverty.

Another issue is that looked-after children and young people who live in a residential unit might not have easy access to Wi-Fi or be able to freely access the internet—for their own safety, they might have to do that in a public place. It is difficult for such children and young people to seek help and support in a public forum. Social media needs to be accessible to those with disabilities, too.

Generally, we are very supportive of the use of social media and the internet by children and young people, but services must take into account all the needs of children and young people across Scotland.

Heather Noller: I agree with all the points that Pauline McIntyre made, which are all very relevant for young carers, too. Social media and online services are really important for young carers.

I return to the rural and urban question that we have just been discussing. If young carers are not able to leave the home in the evening or if they do not have the chance to get away and go to a youth group or somewhere else outside the home, they can get a break from caring in their own home by seeking online support or by using social media, either to contact other young carers—which is the peer support aspect of it—or to speak to young carer support workers online. I have submitted a paper about Babble, which is our online service for young carers. The service offers young people opportunities to do both those things—they can do either or both, as they wish, whenever they wish. They can also use the service as a bridge to access youth groups if that is what they want to do.

We are aware of the risks of social media as well. Somebody on the first panel spoke about the potential for increased isolation if online interaction is the only social interaction that is happening in a young person's life. We are aware of those risks and we do the best that we can to monitor them and to support young people to make all kinds of links and reduce their isolation.

David Milliken: We are in a slightly different position because we tend to deal with children under the age of five, predominantly—they do not access social media. However, many of our volunteers have a work mobile phone and the mums will text back and forth, so there is an element of texting. Of course, many of our projects have their own social media pages to engage with people as well, but it is not a major factor in our service provision.

Sandra White: Heather, you have given evidence before about the Carers Trust. You mentioned having to consult young people to develop online services. I know that you were here when I asked the previous panel about developing online services. They said that one size does not fit all, and it is obvious that the various groups have varying issues. What is your reaction to what the previous panel said about online services? Should the individual organisations that we heard from ask young people what they want to see online, or should there be an overarching organisation that does that?

Heather Noller: There is space for everything. I would look for as wide a consultation as possible. One reason for having person-centred and young person-led services is so that they are shaped by young people and meet their individual needs, because one size does not fit all.

The Babble service is a replacement for a young carers online service that my organisation has been running since about 2004. I do not know whether you have had a look at the website, but the service has moved from a forum structure, which was popular back then, to looking a bit more like Facebook. It has a similar kind of interaction—people can like other people's posts and so on.

Babble is based on existing services that young people are already using. That was a clear message that we have learned from other organisations and from other kinds of social media and online services. We know that that is how young people want to use services. The service has been very much shaped by young people because we know that if young people are presented with something without being consulted and it does not suit them, they will not use it, so it is a waste of time and money. We need to do as much consultation with young people as possible to make sure that services are right for them.

Sandra White: David, you mentioned that your organisation deals with children who are under the age of five, who obviously do not use social media. However, in your introductory remarks you mentioned young parents and single parents who feel isolated and cannot go out. Would social media help them with that?

David Milliken: It could, but only as an add-on. If someone is stuck at home with three fairly young children, for example, social media would be useful in as much as they could access it when they have two spare moments in their life. However, it would certainly not be a substitute for interacting with people, which is the main gap in people's lives. Social media is a valuable add-on but it is not a replacement for that.

Sandra White: I was not thinking of it as a replacement—it would be an add-on. However, if people want to access information on where they can go and how they can get help, would it not be a good idea to link your own organisation and others to a social media site?

David Milliken: Yes, of course it would. An important part of our volunteers' training is ensuring that they are aware of what is available within the community, so that if people access us that knowledge can be passed on to them. In fact, offering to chum someone along to something is one of the most useful things that our volunteers frequently do. That may give somebody the courage to attend a mother and toddler group, for example that would otherwise be daunting for them to walk into on their own. I agree that that is important, and it is one of the things that we do, but it is still the people who are not accessing our services who will not be reached, and that is the difficulty.

Sandra White: The point that I was trying to get at is that there are agencies out there, such as Mumsnet. If they were added on to the social media profiles for your group, people could get information that way. Would that not be a positive aspect?

David Milliken: Yes, and it works that way quite often.

Sandra White: Do you link to Mumsnet and other agencies?

David Milliken: Yes, we have good relationships with Netmums, Mumsnet and similar organisations. They are hugely useful for some parents, particularly if the parents have a specific issue that they want to raise. They can just type it in and back come 50 suggestions, so it is great—but as an add-on.

Jayne Baxter: All of you, or the organisations that you represent, have contact with young people who are engaged with schools, youth clubs and other things in the voluntary sector. I would like to ask about how everyone works together to plan services for young people who might be socially isolated. Is there scope to use the GIRFEC process, child plans or the other statutory planning processes that are in place to increase awareness of social isolation as an issue and to increase awareness among professionals about how to respond to it?

Heather Noller: At a local level, services in a certain area will definitely work together to support young carers. I mentioned outreach. Young carers services will work with local schools, youth services and any local groups—it depends on the specific local set-up—to ensure that they reach as many young carers as they can.

With regard to GIRFEC and child plans, not a lot of young carers have a child plan. Child plans

have not been very popular, particularly with older young carers who are reaching their late teens. However, if a young carer is identified as having a vulnerability or support need, we hope that all the services that are available to them and that they access will work together to support them as much as they can.

David Milliken: I find that things can be quite different in different areas. Although we have 32 projects, we do not have one per local authority—there happen to be several in one area and none in other areas. Our local projects obviously know what else is available in their area, but in some areas there is almost nothing by way of additional services, or only limited additional services, while in other areas there is quite a range. We find that, at the local level, things tend to be quite well co-ordinated, but there is not so much co-ordination nationally.

Pauline McIntyre: I can see the role of the named person being important in helping to identify children and young people who are at risk of isolation. In terms of the services that might be put in place on the back of that, I hope that there would be a participative approach, so that service providers would talk with the young person and find out what they thought the solutions were. That is often overlooked. There is a feeling that, once a child has disclosed that they are isolated, it is then for the adults to sort it all out, but children and young people are often good at coming up with potential solutions to problems. I guess that it is a combination of factors, so the named person will definitely be helpful.

We recently carried out research into how young people's participation supports achievement and attainment in schools. As part of that, we looked at children and young people who were living in poverty and were doing much better than expected in school. We found that the schools that they were in had a respectful and inclusive feel to them. They included children and young people in all the decisions that were made, not just through traditional routes such as the pupil council but by involving them across the board. Having that kind of atmosphere and culture in a school helps to pick up on isolation.

Jayne Baxter: That is what I was trying to get to—if building that culture throughout the public sector is not too big a challenge for one meeting.

10:45

Pauline McIntyre: I am not sure that I can do that alone. The culture comes into it, however. If we can spread the lessons and create a culture where children and young people are viewed as agents in their own change, have the power to come up with solutions to their own problems, can seek out support and can then be supported, that will be crucial in sorting out the bigger problems.

Annabel Goldie: I was struck by something that David Milliken said earlier about where referrals to Home-Start come from and the percentage that come from health visitors. One of the dilemmas lies in trying to identify a problem. If Home-Start gets a referral, it can go in and work with families with children under five.

Given the percentage of referrals that come from health visitors, is that an important referral point for you and something that you would like to build on in conjunction with local health services?

David Milliken: Absolutely. We think that health visitors are wonderful because they visit all young families. Of course, people can hide things, and they frequently do. However, because of the universal aspect—health visitors visit all new-born babies and young children—that is a fantastic source of referrals. At a local level, we work hard with health visitors to ensure that they are aware of our capacity and of the areas where we are able to be of assistance. When that works well, it is fantastic. I would love that to be built on.

Annabel Goldie: In such a situation, you may be dealing with a parent who is a young person. On how we address the development of social connections and friendships, is Home-Start able to nurture something within a parent who is a young person? Is there a legacy even for their young child?

David Milliken: Yes, absolutely—that is very important. It helps children to become more ready to attend nursery school and primary school if they are already engaging with other children. If somebody is stuck at home or staying at home with their children, that is not good for very young children. In fact, it will breed isolation in very young children.

Annabel Goldie: That leads on to my next question, convener, but first, perhaps we can hear from Pauline McIntyre and Heather Noller on the importance of social connections and friendships. How can they be nurtured and encouraged?

Pauline McIntyre: That is a good question. There are two elements to it. For children and young people, the people who are possibly most important to them if they are not to feel socially isolated are their friends and peers. It is a matter of creating opportunities for children to have contact with their peers so that they are not isolated.

The question about the other support that could be provided is a difficult one. I will pass that one over to my colleagues.

Heather Noller: From a young carer's perspective, it is indeed about nurturing links and

friendships that are already there. That is about supporting young carers to connect with other young carers—their peers—while also maintaining friendships outside of that. It goes back to the young person's choice. Not all young people will want to go to a young carers group. Sometimes that might not represent a break from caring for them—actual or imagined. They might think that they will just be talking about caring issues, but they will want to get away from that and talk about things that any young person would want to talk about.

There is a quote on our website, Babble, from someone who posted a piece about their caring role. Just at the end, they mention that their interests are tae kwon do, singing and dancing. That balanced their wanting to talk about their caring role and experiences with wanting to talk about their hobbies and interests, like any other young person would want to do.

Again, it is about working with schools, young people's services and universal services to ensure that they are aware of how to support young carers, ensuring that other people in the school or people who are going to the young person's service are aware of young carers' issues so that they can be supported in a range of situations.

I agree that it is a big question. I am not sure how we can resolve that issue.

Annabel Goldie: I noticed that, when I was asking David Milliken about health visitors, you were nodding approvingly. How does that issue impact on your particular client group, with regard to what carers, and particularly young carers, are trying to cope with?

Heather Noller: I was nodding because I do not really know a lot about the interaction between health visitors and carers. Obviously, if a professional is aware of a family in which there is a young carer and someone with an illness or a disability, they should be aware of how to refer the case and support the people concerned. In relation to our young carers services, most of the referrals come from schools. The other referrals come from social work services and GPs.

The Convener: I have a question concerning GIRFEC. In other evidence sessions, we have heard that everything leads back to the named person. The role of that person seems to be getting bigger and they seem to be getting more and more responsibilities. How can we ensure that those named persons have the right skills and tools at hand when they are appointed? Someone who is a social worker, a health visitor or a teacher already has the right skills and training. How do we ensure that the named person has those skills?

Pauline McIntyre: Speaking about not health visitors but education generally, headteachers will already have been in contact with a lot of the issues that will be raised with them as they take on the named person role. The key is ensuring that there is sufficient training and awareness raising with regard to the various issues that affect children and young people, as well as the support that is available to them.

One of the daunting aspects of being a named person will be trying to figure out where to go with the information that you are sitting on and ensuring that you are working in a child and young person-centred way. The key thing concerns ensuring that the action that you take and the support that you put in place is entirely appropriate to that child or young person and that they are part and parcel of the decision-making process.

I do not think that named persons will have an easy ride of it. A lot of responsibility is sitting on them and there is a lot of pressure on them to ensure that they know where to go. However, what is important is that they have the confidence to know where to start; the other support can wrap around that afterwards.

The Convener: Will adequate training be given to the named persons?

Pauline McIntyre: I am not aware of specific training that is being offered to named persons. I do not think that there is a national programme, but I am not entirely sure about that.

The Convener: Christian Allard would like to ask a few questions.

Christian Allard: We have heard a lot about anti-bullying policies and campaigns. Are they relevant with regard to social isolation? Do we need to have specific policies for social isolation? David Milliken did some research on this issue. Is there a link to policies and campaigns that are being run by the Scottish Government, local authorities, the national health service and other public bodies?

David Milliken: Bullying does not come to the forefront of anything that we deal with. I am sure that there is an element of that with regard to the families that we deal with. However, that is not something that is predominant. I am not well placed to answer that question.

Christian Allard: My point was that anti-bullying policies have been effective with regard to what they do. We have no such policies on social isolation. Do we need something similar to the anti-bullying policies?

David Milliken: That is quite a difficult question, and I do not want to give a blasé answer. Obviously, the existence of services that combat social isolation is of huge importance. It would be

well worth identifying exactly what can combat social isolation and having a strategy to ensure that those services are adequately available to those who need them. That would be a big task. As well as the identification and creation of a strategy, significant resourcing would be required to go along with that. However, it would be a great step forward.

Pauline McIntyre: Christian Allard asked whether there should be a specific policy for social isolation. A key point to bear in mind, as with anti-bullying policies, is that a policy is only as good as the people who operate it. If you are asking whether there should be something somewhere that automatically makes people think about social isolation for children and young people, the answer is yes. One key way of doing that is to ensure that, when new proposals or legislation are considered, a children's rights impact assessment is carried out. That means thinking about the issues from the perspective of a child or young person and ensuring that all their rights are covered. Often, when policies that have a massive effect on children and young people are created, children and young people are missed out from the process.

That perspective should also be considered when changes are made to an existing policy. Even what seem to be relatively minor changes can have a massive impact on children and young people. For example, one issue that has been raised with our office recently is about reductions in additional support for learning for children and young people with disabilities and in support for children for whom English is an additional language. If support is removed at that level, the knock-on effect on social isolation is huge. We need somebody to have an overview and think about what the impact of changes at one stage will be on the child later on. We need that broad overview and we need social isolation to be up there in the consideration as one of the likely risks for children and young people.

Christian Allard: Do you not think that we should have distinct policies? Is that the view of all three panel members?

Heather Noller: A policy would absolutely be a good thing. However, as ever, the question would be whether the policy would translate into practice. To echo what the others have said, we would need to ensure that the people who provide services and work with young people can implement the policy as fully as possible, and we cannot really predict how that would work.

Christian Allard: What about a campaign? The anti-bullying campaign has been quite successful. Should the Scottish Government have a national campaign?

Heather Noller: Yes. I see no reason why not, but, again, it would have to be led by young people and people who are experiencing social isolation, which would cause its own problems. We have heard a lot about the lack of confidence that is caused by isolation and loneliness. Participating in developing a campaign on that might just be part of cycle of not being able to be involved. In theory, we absolutely should have a campaign, but I am not sure how it could be implemented effectively.

David Milliken: It would be difficult to have a national campaign, because the objectives would be fairly wide ranging. It would be difficult to identify how successful the campaign had been, unless it could be focused and narrowed down sufficiently or compartmentalised. In theory, it is a good idea but, in practice, I can see difficulties. As my colleagues have said, the implementation would obviously be the key.

Christian Allard: Are there any other roles that you would like the Scottish Government to have in combating social isolation?

Pauline McIntyre: I go back to my point that it is about having an awareness of the impact of actions on children and young people and including them in decisions that are made about them. For example, when the Scottish Government puts together wellbeing indicators, it should ensure that they are rights-based indicators, so that they are focused not on the behaviour of a child or young person and something that they have done, but on the support that could be provided to enable them to be the best that they can be. We are talking about a cultural shift. That is what you are aiming for. Although a campaign could be helpful in that it would highlight the issue, if you want to make a difference, you need to aim for a cultural shift, and rights are a big part of that.

Who Cares? Scotland carried out some research in December last year. It looked at children and young people and hopes about the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 in relation to corporate parenting. Who Cares? Scotland found that when adults were aware of rights, the consequence was that there was a much more participative and open environment for children and young people.

There is a dual aspect about children and young people knowing more about their rights and their ability to enforce them and the other side, which is helping adults understand that so that they can be more open to engaging with children and young people.

11:00

The Convener: Christian Allard has talked about some sort of campaign. I am thinking that there could be isolated and lonely young people out there who may be depressed but who do not associate that with the situation that they are in. They do not realise that, if they could remove the loneliness and isolation, it would help with the depression and the other effects that loneliness and isolation have on them. Could there be some sort of highlighting campaign in schools, hospitals and doctors' surgeries to make people aware that, if they are depressed or ill, it could be because they are lonely and isolated, and to show them the simple things that could be done to help their recovery? I think that that is something quite simple. Is it so simple that it would be ineffective, or would it work?

Christian Allard: Instead of thinking about it like that, should we think about it the other way? Should we promote interaction between young people? Do we have that kind of campaign?

The Convener: We are about to have another question, so if you do not have the answers just now, we are quite happy to write to you with the questions and you can reply in writing or in an email.

Annabel Goldie: I have a quick question on what Heather Noller was saying. My understanding is that every local authority education department should have an anti-bullying strategy, which should be operated and applied in every school for which the authority is responsible. Pauline McIntyre, has any assessment work been done on how those strategies work in practice?

Pauline McIntyre: We have not carried out that work, but I suspect that respectme might have, as it has a remit for that. Every school can have a strategy and a policy, but the type of stuff that comes through our inquiry service is often about how they are applied in practice.

There are real difficulties for children and young people who are being bullied, as they can feel that the solutions that are offered actually isolate them further. Instead of tackling the bullying, the solution that is offered can be to take the person who is being bullied out of the situation. That is a key part of the issue. Although you can have a policy and a strategy, it comes down to how they are used. The knowledge of the people who use them and their understanding of the impact that their actions will have on the individual child or young person are also important.

Annabel Goldie: That underlines your point about changing culture.

Pauline McIntyre: Absolutely.

Sandra White: Culture and other issues come into it.

I have a worry. Everyone, including the committee, has their own definitions of isolation and loneliness. If we were to put forward a project, I would worry that it would be too prescriptive and be a tick-box exercise. We had evidence from ChildLine that it had received a phone call at Christmas from a child who was lonely; the child was not disadvantaged in any other respect, but all the other people in their house were on different types of social media. That is an example of cultural change that has happened.

As the convener said, we need to question whether isolation or loneliness is reflected in depression or whether loneliness causes depression. As Christian Allard said, we need to look at pushing forward a more positive aspect through social media connections. All the voluntary groups could get together and have a register of where people can access services. I would hate for us to have a tick-box exercise; that would be the worst thing that we could do.

That is probably a comment, rather than a question for the witnesses.

The Convener: Thank you.

If there are no supplementaries on that, we will move on to John Finnie.

John Finnie: I have a question for Pauline McIntyre about what I feel is a lot of misrepresentation about the named person issue. We have heard from David Milliken that the bulk of referrals to his organisation—dealing with pre-school children—come from health visitors. The health visitor is of course the named person for a pre-school child. To me, that is living proof that the system is absolutely working. Would you agree with that?

Pauline McIntyre: The named person is essentially consolidating the good practice that is in place already. I absolutely agree with that. Health visitors have been identified as being best placed to pick up on those issues for children under the age of five. For older children and young people, it is teachers and headteachers at primary and secondary schools. Absolutely—health visitors have the knowledge and the day-to-day connection with the child or young person, and they are ideally placed to figure out what will work for them.

John Finnie: Given that they are professionals, and that they should in any case be working collaboratively with their colleagues, the question of additional training is irrelevant in many respects. It is a matter of core training.

Pauline McIntyre: Yes—it should be core. It should not be viewed as an add-on. Anyone who

has been in a position of having to make a child protection referral, for example, will know that that takes quite a personal toll on someone. If someone has information and is trying to decide what the best course of action is, how to pass the information on and who to pass the information on to, it is a lot of pressure to put on one person in a school. Luckily, the named persons who are there are well trained and have the ability to take that forward. Recognising the pressure that is put on a named person and the wide range of decisions that they will have to make on a day-to-day basis is key.

John Finnie: I had a range of questions on good practice for David Milliken. We have heard some examples of good practice. You referred to a study from 2006. You said that this might not be the case, but I suspect that it is the case that many of the same factors still apply. Would you be able to share that information with the committee, please?

David Milliken: Yes, certainly.

John Finnie: Subsequent to this meeting, of course.

David Milliken: Of course—yes.

John Finnie: You spoke about some referrals involving people noticing difficulty. You said that after you had mentioned the various professionals. That is very reassuring, in some respects, and it might suggest that people are not as isolated as they imagine.

David Milliken: In some instances, yes. Sometimes people's friends refer them, although people who have friends who can refer them tend to be less isolated. It is difficult to generalise from that, and it involves a relatively small proportion of our referrals, but it is true to that extent.

John Finnie: We heard from the previous panel about the role that community psychiatric nurses play, and about the importance of awareness. There is a challenge there, and it is a catch-22 situation, because someone might not recognise the need and, because of their condition, the person might not be prepared to seek help anyway. Do you see a role here? Is it about more than just raising awareness? How do we get people to come and get the help that might in some way alleviate their isolation?

Pauline McIntyre: There definitely is a role there. I suppose that you are talking about a sort of dual thing. First, it is about how children and young people know to seek help and when to seek help. There is an information element to that. The other bit is about people who work closely with children and young people and people who have contact with them picking up on the early signs that something is going wrong in that child or young person's life. You mentioned the named person earlier. A key part of their role is to consider early support and intervention so as to avoid problems spiralling.

We had a recent example concerning a young person with severe mental health problems. Some of the delays that arose in the course of accessing appropriate support for them led to their condition deteriorating significantly. Even a delay in providing a service can have a massive impact on that child or young person's wellbeing. The young person concerned missed out on their right to education, their mental health deteriorated to the extent that they became violent, and they were not able to have contact with their peers. They became more isolated, and they were not allowed to go outside, for their own safety.

If we do not put in the support at an early stage for a young person in a situation like that, or if we do not pick up on an issue, it spirals out of control, and we potentially end up with a much worse situation for that young person further down the line.

John Finnie: And the young person's rights are not being met.

Pauline McIntyre: Absolutely. Lack of money can be blamed for a failure to provide a service. However, not providing the service can have a huge impact on a child or young person. From the long-term point of view, it is much better to provide the service at an early stage when the child or young person is still in a position from which they can recover than to wait until they are much further down the line.

David Milliken: There are also difficulties with the nature of services and what services are available. People are sometimes reluctant or scared to come forward and say that they need support, because doing so might make them feel inadequate or, which is more likely, they might be worried that somebody else will think that they are inadequate and take some action that they might or might not like.

Home-Start works well because it is all about choice in that the volunteers choose to be with families and they choose to have the support. That is quite straightforward and means that we are a relatively non-threatening organisation. However, the same cannot always be said for other organisations. For example, we know fine that people are scared that, if they engage with the social work department, their children might be taken into care. It is fine for me to know the statistics about how frequently that happens, but that is not the same as the perception out there.

The issue is not just the availability of services but the willingness to engage with services and the manner in which they are delivered, which are

very important. The willingness to engage with a service clearly depends on the extent of somebody's need. Home-Start might not be appropriate for a family situation in which children need to be taken into care or looked after. However, for lesser degrees of need, it is important that the service is non-threatening and supportive.

John Finnie: Is it a fear for young carers that someone will step in and they will be separated from the person they care for?

Heather Noller: Yes, definitely. Young carers who care for someone with an addiction or mental health problem are very worried that the family will be split up or that their parents or siblings will get into trouble. There is a fear of services, including healthcare services. There is also a sense of frustration about why the healthcare professionals are not making the person they care for, such as a parent or a sibling, better and solving the problem. That can be a real issue for young carers. If no one explains to them enough about the condition of the person they look after, that can be frustrating and difficult for them.

John Finnie: Thank you, and thank you very much indeed all of you.

The Convener: As members have no further questions, I thank the witnesses for coming along and sharing their knowledge and information with us, which has been really useful.

Our next meeting will take place on Monday, 16 March at the Bridge in Easterhouse, where the committee will take further evidence for its inquiry into age and social isolation.

Meeting closed at 11:13.

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