



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE

Thursday 28 February 2013

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EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE

7th Meeting 2013, Session 4

CONVENER

*Mary Fee (West Scotland) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Marco Biagi (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*John Finnie (Highlands and Islands) (Ind)

*Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con)

*John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)

*Siobhan McMahon (Central Scotland) (Lab)

Dennis Robertson (Aberdeenshire West) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Ian Acheson (Equality and Human Rights Commission)

James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP) (Committee Substitute)

Alastair Pringle (Equality and Human Rights Commission)

Lynn Welsh (Equality and Human Rights Commission)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Douglas Thornton

LOCATION

Committee Room 4

Scottish Parliament

Equal Opportunities Committee

Thursday 28 February 2013

[The Convener *opened the meeting at 09:00*]

Equality and Human Rights Commission

The Convener (Mary Fee): Good morning. I welcome members and those observing in the public gallery to the seventh meeting in 2013 of the Equal Opportunities Committee and remind everyone to switch their mobile phones either off or to flight mode.

I will begin with a few introductions. Our clerks, researchers and official reporters are at the table on my left and are supported by broadcasting services and the security office, who are situated around the room. I am the committee convener, and I ask members and witnesses to introduce themselves in turn.

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

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

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

James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP): I am the MSP for Glasgow Cathcart.

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

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

Lynn Welsh (Equality and Human Rights Commission): I am head of legal at the Equality and Human Rights Commission.

Alastair Pringle (Equality and Human Rights Commission): I am the EHRC's national director.

Ian Acheson (Equality and Human Rights Commission): I am the EHRC's chief operating officer.

The Convener: Thank you.

Agenda item 1 is evidence on the Equality and Human Rights Commission. I welcome the witnesses to the meeting and, before I open the session to questions, ask them to explain their role at the EHRC. Would you like to start, Alastair?

Alastair Pringle: Absolutely. I have been the national director in Scotland since December last

year and my role is about the management of the strategy and the delivery of our work in Scotland.

Ian Acheson: I was appointed as the EHRC's chief operating officer last September and my role is largely about delivering its corporate business across Great Britain.

Lynn Welsh: I head up the legal team, which is responsible for legal enforcement work, case work, training and transfer of expertise, and was for a short time last year the EHRC's acting co-director.

The Convener: Members have a number of questions. Marco Biagi will begin.

Marco Biagi: I suspect that many of the committee's questions will revolve around the EHRC's capacity to undertake its duties. As a starter for 10, how will the structural changes allow you to continue to offer sufficient advisory work and guidance, particularly to employers, to head off at the pass any human rights difficulties that they might have?

Alastair Pringle: You will be aware that, after the GB-wide review of the EHRC, helpline services were removed from our funding and have been moved to a centrally run service that is sponsored by the Government equalities office. As a result, providing that sort of advice is no longer one of our responsibilities. I will ask Lynn Welsh to clarify what the new advisory service offers specifically to employers.

Lynn Welsh: The new advice helpline advises only employees and service users, not employers. However, the commission has continued to produce technical guidance and codes of practice for employers; indeed, last week or the week before, we issued guidance on new religion and belief issues for small employers. I suppose that we are trying to make most effective use of our resources by producing guidance and putting stuff on to the web rather than by providing one-to-one advice.

Marco Biagi: Yes. I am fairly familiar with the "Religion or belief in the workplace" guide, which has had quite a high profile after the European court cases. Given that three cases went one way and one the other, I wonder whether there might be potential for confusion.

Such guidance is available on your website for people who go looking for it, but how do you actively disseminate it?

Lynn Welsh: With that guide, we put out press releases and directly emailed organisations, usually the umbrella organisations that we work with. We try to draw attention to that work in any way we can. We also have a lot of discussions, meet a lot of stakeholders and so on and make

information on new advice available through those methods.

Marco Biagi: When roughly did the original advice that the new guide was updating come out?

Lynn Welsh: I do not think that we have produced any specific advice on religion and belief; this is the first and it was triggered by the cases that you mentioned. We have produced a statutory code of practice, which was laid before the Westminster Parliament in 2010 or 2011.

Marco Biagi: How was that code promoted?

Lynn Welsh: In much the same way as we promote our other work. It was put on to the web. Before it was finalised, we held consultation events to get feedback and then contacted those who had been involved in those events to tell them that the code and guidance were available on the web.

Marco Biagi: I realise that the helpline is aimed at smaller employers, but do you get many inquiries from larger employers or major companies who might be concerned about representation issues with regard to this particular guidance? Do you have the capacity to respond to them?

Lynn Welsh: We received inquiries when we had the helpline. However, the helpline stopped functioning last year and we are trying to make arrangements with the new GEO helpline to get statistics on that issue and get a clearer picture of the situation. However, it is fair to say that that work is in its early formative stages.

Alastair Pringle: We have been trying to address some of the reduction in our capacity by looking at how we work across GB as a whole. We are not currently focusing a significant amount of resource on employers or the private sector, so we have been drafting a private sector strategy for the whole of GB that will be run with resources right across the office. Perhaps Ian Acheson can spell out some of the key elements of that strategy.

Ian Acheson: Forging relationships with private sector employers is relatively new territory for us, and we have had significant success in that regard. For example, we are working with some fairly big FTSE 350 employers on an equalities standard that we can support and which will act as a kitemark for promoting equality and enabling companies to reach a standard that we believe will promote fairness in the workplace.

However, although that will be a key plank in our private sector strategy, there is no doubt that, as Alastair Pringle has made clear, since the helpline was removed from our direct control we have had less capacity and less direct involvement in receiving intelligence and providing guidance directly. As a result, our strategy has to be more

about enabling employers and employees to understand their equality responsibilities, particularly in the workplace. It has to help us work hand in hand with people instead of directly funding work as we might have done in the past. We simply do not have that capacity.

John Finnie: Good morning. Personally, I would prefer to have the people who made the decisions about your funding sitting before us rather than your good selves. I appreciate the role that you are playing.

Given the United Kingdom Government's statement that it has

"decided to scrap vague, unnecessary and obsolete provisions",

do you think that you have sufficient resources to undertake the work that has been delegated to you?

Alastair Pringle: It has to be said that things were looking a bit bleaker last summer, when we in Scotland were working towards a directorate with about 10 staff plus a national director. However, following the core budget review, which focused on what we essentially needed to deliver our core functions, we are somewhat happier with the budget that we have received for GB as a whole and are—we hope—looking at having 17.5 full-time equivalent staff by the end of this year.

Obviously, we have had to change the way in which we do business. Because we do not necessarily have the same capacity to carry out some of our stakeholder engagement work, we have had to work through other agencies instead of doing some of that work ourselves. That said, we have been working closely with the new board of commissioners at GB level and with our statutory Scotland committee to design a work plan for the year ahead, which we are actually quite happy with. The work plan covers a significant amount of ground and definitely focuses more on working through others. For example, in our work with audit and inspection bodies we will look at how regulation can positively promote equality through the services that those bodies regulate.

Overall, we feel that we now have a budget that will allow us to deliver our core functions. Across GB as a whole, we have a pot in the region of £8 million to deliver new programme work. Across the commission, we have been working on a bidding process to work out which programmes would best fit the criteria for that pot of money. Given that the helpline has been removed and grants have been removed from our control, overall our budget cut has been at the same level as that of other publicly funded bodies that have been going through a similar process at GB level. Obviously, we would like more resources because we could

then do more, but we feel that, compared to where we were in the summer, we now have the funding that we require to enable us to deliver in a slightly different way our core functions in Scotland.

John Finnie: Would it be possible for you to share a rough outline of that work plan with the committee? I presume that a workload assessment is done in respect of each task and, similarly, in respect of the tasks that any individual staff member would be anticipated to undertake.

Alastair Pringle: In response to the budget cuts, we have been going through a change programme, which Ian Acheson might want to say a bit more about. We have had to introduce new ways of working across the commission so that we can utilise better the more limited resources that we have across GB as a whole. After Ian Acheson has said a bit more about what the change programme has meant in terms of staffing and resource allocation, I will say what we plan to do with that in terms of our draft business plan for the year ahead.

John Finnie: As there is a statutory obligation to consult the trade unions and staff associations on any substantive changes in the workplace, could that be alluded to as well? Presumably, part of any workplace assessment would be a stress assessment, given that you have a reduced number of staff to undertake the workload. Any information that you could share about that, either just now or by providing documents in future, would be helpful.

Ian Acheson: It is important to say at the start that such is the breadth of the commission's remit that there would simply never be enough capacity to respond to all the requests for help that we receive. We have always been in the position where we have had to have some form of triage and assessment of what we can do to intervene, either by providing support on behalf of people or by regulating. That has been thrown into sharper relief because of the significant reduction in our resources. We have had to examine how the whole commission operates to ensure that it is operating in as flexible and effective a way as possible to deliver our programme of objectives for next year.

As Alastair Pringle alluded to, we were in a potentially much worse position in terms of budget cuts when we considered the starting offer from our colleagues in the Government equalities office for spring of this year. I am pleased to reiterate that we have made a very comprehensive argument for steady-state funding over the next two years, which will give us approximately 200 people across the commission to deliver the business.

To give you some context, I am very keen indeed that two things happen as a result of that. First, I am keen that we retain—as we are required to do—a strong and distinct presence in both Scotland and Wales to deliver the commission's business corporately and those bits of business that the Scotland committee and the Wales committee decide to do and can resource.

John Finnie: Presumably, you will maintain a strong presence in England as well.

Ian Acheson: Yes. Given the size of the population, one might say that we will maintain a proportionately stronger presence.

Secondly, we need to ensure that we direct staff as effectively as possible. In the spring of last year, we were in a position where we would have needed radically to change the structure of the organisation because of anticipated much more severe budget cuts for next year and the year after. In the event, those cuts did not materialise, which gave us a nice problem, if you like, about how most effectively to brigade and direct the people whom we have to deliver our business. We thought that the most effective response was a resource pool concept, which allows people from across the commission to work on business according to their skills. One benefit of that is that we have unlocked potential across the organisation.

In Scotland, because of the requirement to work in Scotland and because of different jurisdictional and legal requirements, the practical reality is that, as in Wales, there will be less of that flexible working than there probably will be in England. However, we still want to ensure that we deploy everybody across the organisation as effectively as possible. That will start with ensuring that the commission in Scotland can deliver its business in Scotland.

09:15

To put a bit more flesh on the bones, we are considering a series of options that we have identified for work next year. Alastair Pringle might allude to some of the specific Scottish work later. Our GB commission board—Kaliani Lyle, the Scottish commissioner, is a member of it—will consider the options that we have identified. We will then go through a process of assigning people to the options in a way that has not really been done in the past. The aim is to ensure that we properly resource the work that we say that we are going to do.

One criticism that has rightly been levelled at us over the past number of years is that we have been good at overpromising and underdelivering. That reflects the nature of our work, the span of our activity and the requests that we get for help

and assistance. This year, we are trying to be much more modest—to reflect the reduced resources that we have—and much more intelligent about how we resource our activities. Implicit in the assignment process that will take place after the board has green lighted options will be ensuring that the right number of the right people are working in the right way to deliver the objectives. Implicit in that is an examination of workload.

I know that people in the organisation have been through the wringer. We have been through a period of significant turbulence and uncertainty, particularly in Scotland where, prior to my appointment, we had to contemplate a significant reduction in headcount and there were difficult conversations with staff. There was a proposal to reduce the number of staff to, I think, 10 with a national director, but we are pleased that, in the event, that reduction did not take place—I believe that we are still working on the basis of 17.5 staff and a national director. That process put people through a significant amount of stress, which I am afraid was unavoidable, because the organisation had to react to a scenario in which a significantly reduced budget was envisaged. However, the one that we have actually arrived at is consistent with delivering our legal requirements as a regulator for equality and with retaining our A status as a human rights institution.

John Finnie: I was going to ask about the resource pool. That could just be a sop to mask staff reductions, particularly given the different jurisdictions and the specific knowledge that is needed to operate in them. How will that approach apply to staff who work in Scotland and what have the trade unions and staff associations had to say about it?

Ian Acheson: I ask Alastair Pringle to say a bit more about how we have been doing that locally.

Alastair Pringle: The trade unions have been involved throughout the process. We will be happy to follow up on that by providing a bit more detail, as I do not have any information to hand, other than the fact that we have been engaging throughout the process with the trade unions and staff groups.

John Finnie: Have they suggested alternatives and, if so, have those been examined?

Alastair Pringle: I am not sure about that.

Ian Acheson: It is certainly fair to say that the trade union side has significant concerns about the resource pool model. The required consultation has been carried out and there will be on-going conversation with staff associations. We believe that the resource pool model is the right one for the commission. I understand that it is sometimes easy to use words such as “efficiency”

and “effectiveness” as a cover for something else but, as far as I am concerned, I want to develop the capacity of people who work in the organisation in a way that has not been possible in the past. To an extent, we are still coping with the legacy of the sort of shotgun marriage of three regulators at the inception of the commission in 2007. People are still working in silos to an extent and they still have an idea that they operate only across a certain narrow aspect of the commission’s business.

We want to say that if staff have the potential and the skills, they can work across the commission’s business. That will be important for the career development of people in Scotland and Wales, who will be able to participate in corporate business across GB. For example, we are considering that next year there will be a national piece of work on modern apprenticeships. Because of the work, experience and capacity that Scotland has, I am quite keen that Scotland might lead that, although obviously that is still being considered by commissioners; it has not been finalised yet. It is important that other countries in GB take the lead in delivering some of our nationally significant work.

We are in consultation with trade unions. I will not hide the fact that they are not happy conceptually with what we are proposing, but I believe, and our executive team is clear, that it is a sensible and intelligent way to spend our scarce resources to their maximum effect. A consequence of that will be to unfreeze and unlock some of the talent within the organisation across the organisation, so that people can be developed properly.

John Finnie: Do we have a shared view of what “consultation” means? Do you mean that you engage with unions and take on board some of their issues, or do you mean that you tell them what you have decided?

Ian Acheson: We are a new executive team and we are trying to take the organisation in a new direction after a period of very significant turbulence and—as you will be aware—quite sustained criticism about how it has operated; a lot of that criticism was legitimate, I have to say. We have a credibility issue that we need to tackle.

Many brilliant, passionate and committed people work across the commission. Knowing what I did about the commission’s reputation, I would not have joined it had I not been convinced that there was a job of work to do and that the commission has a very important and significant role to play to make society fairer. I want the people who hold that passion and commitment inside the organisation to be developed and I also want us to be efficient and effective in what we do. The executive team has decided that the way to do

that is through a resource pool concept that will support people to deliver our business. What we have to do is go out and win the argument.

It is by no means a black-and-white situation. We are in the process of explaining to people how the resource pool will work, what benefits there will be to them and what benefits there will be to the delivery of our business next year. I am confident that we will win that argument and bring people on side. However, we have to keep talking to staff associations.

John Finnie: With respect, Mr Acheson, if you are consulting you will know other people's views and your staff's views. Your staff are your most valuable resource. Is the die cast, or is there an opportunity to shape the organisation with the involvement of your staff?

Ian Acheson: We have decided that we will use the resource pool concept, for the reasons that I hope I have articulated.

John Finnie: That is telling, rather than consulting.

Ian Acheson: We have consulted on that change. Where we get constructive feedback and identify views that we have not thought about, and we can change how we do things, we will certainly do that. It would not make any sense to maintain a permanent opposition; we are not in that business.

We will consult trade unions and we will consult our staff, whether or not they are in trade unions; as you said, they are our most valuable resource. They are the people who deliver our business, at the end of the day, and we are listening very hard to what they say. We are trying to change the organisation for everyone's benefit and frankly it would be crazy not to take concerns into account and ensure that we are explaining ourselves. Where it is possible, we are adjusting how we implement the changes that I have described.

John Finnie: Can you confirm that that is an on-going process?

Ian Acheson: It never stops. We will have to review how the resource pool is working and we will do that, because if something is not working it is not in our interests to continue doing it.

As I said, we have fewer resources and some big challenges. We have critics whom we need to at least neutralise, if not bring on side, with regard to our work and the value that we deliver to citizens across Great Britain. I am certain that the resource pool is the way to do it, but if it is not, and experience demonstrates that we need to work in a different way, restructure ourselves differently or employ a different concept, we will do that. However, I am genuinely convinced that through the resource pool mechanism we can release some of the talent that is stuck in various old

hierarchies and silos across the organisation and improve opportunity for our people.

John Finnie: Thank you.

Alastair Pringle: One thing to say is that, in the review of the directorate in Scotland, it was not so much a case of overpromising and underdelivering but that has been an issue elsewhere across the commission.

Where we can, we are happy to offer more information about union involvement.

When we looked at the principles of the resource pool model, we saw that we in Scotland have been working in that way for some time. We have to. We do not operate in silos. Our legal, policy, parliamentary and communication staff all sit in one room and we need all those people to do our work. That is really the basis of the principles that have been introduced. In Scotland, staff have not been overperturbed about the introduction of the resource pool concept. We have discussed the fact that, although we are part of a GB organisation, we must have a certain level of autonomy because of our structures and because the legal and political systems are so different. A member of staff will not wake up one day and find that they are being sent to Cardiff; that will not happen.

What I like about the resource pool model is that it gives staff an opportunity to contribute to new programmes of work—inquiries, for example—that they might not have had the chance to work on in their own office, whether that be in Birmingham, Glasgow or Cardiff. In Scotland, staff certainly appear to be reasonably happy with the principles. Our view is that we should test the model and ensure that its architecture is not overly rigid so that we can use the model to our best advantage and to deliver what we need to deliver.

We have engaged with staff and a support line has been put in place to address staff concerns.

John Finnie asked about the business plan, and we are happy to share it as soon as it is in a fit state. However, Ian Acheson has already mentioned the fact that we are looking at a piece of work on modern apprenticeships led by Scotland for GB. At the most recent meeting of the board of commissioners, there was discussion around a range of activity, including digital inclusion, women in senior management, and work and the response to welfare reform, all of which are relevant to Scotland. We were therefore quite pleased with the overall high-level package.

We have a set of new, Scotland-specific duties in relation to the public sector equality duty, and we will do a fair bit of work on that during the spring, once the equality outcomes have been

published and the other publishing requirements on public authorities have been fulfilled.

We will look to work with the new single police service. Obviously, because it is a new organisation, that gives us a good opportunity to ensure that equality is embedded across its functions. We will follow up work on the human trafficking inquiry; we are pleased about that. On 6 March, a one-year-on follow-up report will be published. I think that it is being launched in the Parliament. We will also continue to work on the disability harassment inquiry, and we are interested in looking at schools and school-based bullying and how that is reported, particularly identity-based harassment.

We have on-going work with the Scottish Human Rights Commission. I am sure that you are all aware that it has primary responsibility for devolved aspects of human rights. We are working closely with it on, for example, a piece of work that we have been developing on human rights and equality impact assessments.

That gives a flavour of some of our proposed areas of Scotland-specific work and GB work that the resource pool will allow us to staff across GB.

Marco Biagi: This might be an obvious thing to say, but that seems quite a lot, given your staffing levels.

Alastair Pringle: A lot of the Scotland-specific work will focus on improvement, such as work with regulators. We have been working with them for the past couple of years to build capacity, knowledge and understanding of equality and how it might contribute to their activity.

We envisage more in-depth work that involves focusing on one area of regulation or working with schools to look at one area in relation to reporting, for instance, in order to identify small and measurable improvements and look at taking them to scale. That puts more of the onus on other bodies to fulfil their equality requirements, instead of us delivering that on their behalf. We propose to take forward such a model.

09:30

Marco Biagi: Has a timescale been set out for a potential progress check, when you can stop to look back at whether you have achieved added value or perhaps spread yourselves too thinly and when you can undertake a lessons-learned exercise?

Alastair Pringle: You raise a useful point. In the organisation's senior management team, we have discussed the issue extensively. A failing in the past has been having great ideas that seem important but not being particularly good at project

management—the design, development and delivery of our programmes of work.

We have established a clear process—a sort of pipeline—for taking work into the organisation and for saying why we are not taking it into the organisation. That ensures that we make a clear case for the work that we are and are not doing.

We have a much clearer assignment process, so we are clear about what we expect to deliver and by when. That feeds into who will deliver the work—the resource pool comes into that. Ian Acheson has overall responsibility for the delivery side, which is about ensuring that we deliver the outcomes that we said we would deliver, by when they were to be delivered. If that does not happen, we have clear markers or flags in place on how to prioritise work across the organisation if we are not delivering it or if it needs to be scaled up in some shape or form.

That is the architectural model, which we are only just starting to test, to be honest. We acknowledge that the issue has been a failing in the organisation in the past.

Marco Biagi: Am I right in understanding that you intend to have not one big progress check but one for each stream?

Ian Acheson: Yes. On 27 March, the board will approve our business plan. Work is on-going to refine some of the options that we have presented to it. After that date, we will get into the new business year from 1 April. I envisage that we will examine monthly all the assignments that are created out of the options. The assignments will have milestones for delivery as part of their structure. We will have a structure for looking monthly at all the due milestones across all the work that we are doing, in order to track progress and, when progress has not been made, to understand why, so that we can report intelligently and in a timely manner to the board.

I will describe another crucial thing that we can do by having a corporate resource management approach. If Alastair Pringle said, "We are unable to deliver this work because key people are missing as a result of circumstances outside our control," it would be possible for the organisation's corporate resources to plug that gap, if the work was a priority. Of course, he and Lynn Welsh would say that that could get quite complicated because of jurisdictional and legal issues—we would have to keep a close eye on that. For example, a lawyer from Croydon might not be much use to people up here who were doing something that was Scotland specific.

There are ways of moving resources around. I am clear that that does not just mean abstracting them from Scotland and Wales when that is appropriate; it also means moving England-based

resources when that is appropriate. Of course, because of the differences that have been described, that would be difficult.

We must have—and will be held to account closely for by the Government equalities office, which is our sponsoring agency—a system that says that we are on track to deliver things, that the scale of what we say that we will deliver is manageable and that the work is being monitored. One of our problems in the past was not knowing what we were monitoring, because of how the deliverables were constructed—that would mean vagueness in and vagueness out, as it were.

We will be much more disciplined this year in saying what outcome we are trying to deliver in whatever the piece of work is, whether it is Scotland-specific work or corporate GB work, and in being able to interrogate that all the way along. To be frank, we have no option but to take that disciplined view, given the circumstances and the history.

The Convener: My next questions follow on from a point that Marco Biagi made and are about monitoring outcomes. The concern has been raised with us that, because of the cuts in your resources and staffing, you will be unable to properly monitor outcomes and make assessments. Is that concern valid? Will that be a difficulty, given the rest of your work programme, which you have touched on?

Ian Acheson: I am very confident that we will have the capacity to monitor what we do. It is a good point. One of the things that we have to guard against when it comes to the shape of the organisation is monitoring becoming the master rather than the servant of action and delivery.

The fact that, this year, our starting point is a determinedly more modest approach to what we are trying to deliver gives us a bit more hope that we will deliver. Comment has been made about this year's programme being fairly ambitious. Compared with what we had to deliver over the past 12 months, we are reducing significantly what we are promising for next year. If we start from a position of having to deliver a smaller number of things, it follows that we ought to be better at ensuring that we actually deliver them.

Siobhan McMahon: As we know, Mr Pringle—you said so at the start—the helpline is no longer your responsibility. However, I am sure that you would agree that the people from Scotland who phone it are your responsibility. Given that we know that the number of calls from Scotland went down from 400 to 210 between October, when funding for the helpline was removed, and January, how are you actively engaging with those individuals who would have phoned it? The number of calls to the helpline has nearly halved.

It is clear that those people needed advice. They are your responsibility. How are you engaging with those people?

Alastair Pringle: We have been concerned about the loss of the helpline and the loss of Scotland-specific expertise. One way in which we have been trying to address the deficit is by investing quite a lot of staff time and energy in a transfer of expertise programme, which involves building up knowledge and expertise of other advice givers across the country. We are looking at how we can engage more broadly and possibly more strategically with public bodies across the country, to raise their awareness and understanding of situations in which it might be appropriate for them to offer advice and support.

We have been feeding into the central team at GB level that is liaising with the UK Government over the management of the contract some of the concerns that have been raised in calls that we have received from people who have used the line. We are very keen to improve the UK helpline service, and we will do all that we can to build capacity and understanding of Scottish issues and Scottish agencies. The transfer of expertise programme is an important plank in our work. Lynn Welsh might want to say a wee bit about that.

Lynn Welsh: The idea behind it is to get more advisers and lawyers across Scotland skilled enough to give good advice and to provide assistance to people. Discrimination and human rights law are not well understood or well resourced when it comes to advice.

The loss of the helpline—especially the Scotland part of the helpline—has been a serious problem. We are no longer capable of giving advice to people who want to call us, so we have to put a lot of resource into upskilling and supporting the new advice line that has been set up. We have been in touch with the provider of that line to ensure that it has the right contacts and the right referral systems to serve Scotland properly.

Siobhan McMahon: Are you telling me that there is nothing that you can do to set up an additional line in Scotland? I understand that the line that is now in place cannot give advice on devolved matters. If that is the case, there is a lack of provision in Scotland.

Lynn Welsh: It can give advice on devolved issues, and it should be doing that. It is restricted in to whom it gives advice—it gives advice only to service users and not to employers or service providers—but it should be giving advice about devolved as well as reserved issues, because discrimination and human rights involve a mix of devolved and reserved issues.

We cannot provide a line in Scotland. We have had our money for helpline provision removed. That money is now being put into the new helpline, which is outwith our control. We could not set up another helpline for Scotland.

Siobhan McMahon: I hear that the new helpline has not referred one single piece of intelligence or possible legal case.

Lynn Welsh: We have so far had no referrals in Scotland. I think that there has been a small number of referrals in England.

Siobhan McMahon: That is quite concerning.

Lynn Welsh: Yes. It concerns me and the EHRC in Scotland generally. We have been in contact with the helpline about that. It is aware that there is perhaps a deficit in Scotland, and I think that it will try to engage the Scottish Government in that. We have provided the helpline with a lot of intelligence and information about who it should contact and we are happy to train its staff if that would be of assistance to them. We have to put our resources into improving the helpline; we do not really have resource to set up something separate.

Siobhan McMahon: You mentioned the UK Government. Clearly, the cuts have come from Westminster. However, you also mentioned the Scottish Government. Have you outlined your concerns to the Scottish Government about cases not being passed on? It is great that upskilling will happen, but 200 people are looking for advice and not getting it. They do not know where to turn because they are used to phoning a number. When they phone for advice, it is not passed on. Six months down the line and there are no legal cases. It is of huge concern. How do we address that?

Lynn Welsh: All that we can do is to push the helpline to improve and tell the UK Government our concerns for it.

Alastair Pringle: We have shared with the Scottish Government our concerns about the cuts. We have regularly met officials and occasionally met ministers. The Scottish Government is aware of the range of concerns and has also expressed its concerns about the cuts to the UK Government.

Siobhan McMahon: It is fine to express concerns, but it is active work that I am requiring on both parts.

Ian Acheson: The contract for this service is with Sitel and the provider is managed by the Government equalities office. Given the concerns that you have raised and some of the initial feedback that we have received from GEO, I will ensure that we keep an extremely close eye on the productivity and delivery of the service. If it is clear that Scotland is not being properly served by

it, whether that is a capacity problem or a training problem—as we understand them, the figures for referrals are quite stark at the moment—we will put pressure on GEO to take the steps that it can do contractually to enforce a good service. I am happy to get back to you on the basis of information that is not commercially in confidence. I am not clear about how the contract operates but there will be information about performance. We will make clear your concerns to GEO about Scotland-related performance and respond to the committee on that.

Siobhan McMahon: That would be helpful.

In response to the convener, you said that you are very confident about the monitoring and what you can do with the capacity that you have. However, I am quite concerned about what has been happening throughout the country on equal pay audits. It is my understanding that only 11 public bodies, councils and health boards have carried out a pay audit, and only three of those meet the 5 per cent criteria set by the EHRC. Given that that is happening now and that it happened when there was greater capacity, how will you monitor the equality duties of more than 250 public bodies?

Lynn Welsh: We have a firm plan in place for the equality duty work and we will be getting researchers in to check all the outcomes set and to check that the information that requires to be published under those duties is published, including pay gap information, equal pay policies and occupational segregation information. We intend to look at all that and ensure that that information has been properly published by all the bodies.

Siobhan McMahon: At the minute, there is only a 20 per cent compliance rate with equal pay audits throughout Scotland. The EHRC says:

“An equal pay audit is the most effective way of establishing whether your organisation is providing equal pay and rewarding employees fairly in practice, and is an effective demonstration of action to promote equal pay under the terms of the equality duties.”

Given that that comes under the equality duties and you will be looking at the equality duties in the spring, how on earth are we in a situation in Scotland in which only 11 public authorities, health boards and councils have taken part in an equal pay audit?

Lynn Welsh: There is no legal duty to carry out auditing. The legal duty is to publish pay gap information, equal pay policies and information on occupational segregation.

We see equal pay audits as a great way of working out how fair a pay system is. There has been a lot of discussion about pushing good practice on that issue and on whether equal pay

audits should become an enforceable part of legislation. We will be concentrating on the specific duties and considering pay gap information and equal pay policies in relation to all the public bodies in Scotland that are covered by those duties.

09:45

Siobhan McMahon: It is my understanding that, under the specific duties, an equal pay gap analysis is required for gender but not for ethnicity and disability. Is that the case?

Lynn Welsh: There is a specific duty to publish information about the pay gap, which is the difference between average hourly male and female salaries. There is also a separate duty to publish equal pay policies and information on occupational segregation. The first publication is about gender only and the second publication, which will be four years on, is about all three—gender, disability and race.

Siobhan McMahon: It is shocking that only 20 per cent of organisations are in compliance with equal pay audits. Given that you think such audits are the most effective way, what proactive work can you do to engage organisations and ensure that they are progressing the issue? I understand the issues with capacity, but my sense is that that work must be done, given that we have a body here. I heard about the work programme, and that is great, but there was no mention of that in the programme.

Lynn Welsh: Our plan is to do research and checking to ensure that the duties have been met and to look at where areas of weakness or failure are. From that information we can design the next pieces of work that we will do.

If publishing equal pay policies is shown to be an area in which organisations are not conforming, we can consider enforcement action or improvement work with various parts of the public sector to see why it is not being done. That would be about equal pay policies, rather than equal pay audits, which are not legally enforceable in the same way.

Siobhan McMahon: Thank you.

Alastair Pringle: That was encompassed under my headline on public sector equality duties and ensuring compliance, on which there will be a broad piece of work. As Lynn Welsh has said, we will be commissioning that work as it will be a significant piece of desk-based research. We want to ensure that the information is available and analysed before we consider what action we take.

The Convener: I want to go back to Siobhan McMahon's point about the helpline. From what I have heard this morning, I am astonished that no

alarm bells rang in the EHRC at the lack of referrals, given the months that have gone by. I wonder at what point someone would have noticed that there had been no referrals. I am surprised that there was not automatic monitoring put in place to ensure that if, for example, a month had gone by and there was not a referral, the question would have been asked.

Alastair Pringle: Since the inception of the service, we have been raising concerns about how it has been set up. We have also been receiving calls from people who have used the service to raise their concerns about the service that they have received. We have been raising these concerns from the start. It is not just now that we have taken cognisance of this issue. We have been feeding that into the Government equalities office. We are roughly six months in with the service and we now have enough evidence across GB to take that forward with the Government equalities office. We have been raising these flags for some time and are not just doing so now. Perhaps Lynn Welsh wants to add to that.

Lynn Welsh: That is true. All the referrals come to my team, and we have a little mailbox, which has remained empty since October. We have been raising concerns since 1 October. We have been asking where the cases are. However, it is not our service to control. All we can do is feed back that we are concerned and that we are being told by people who have contacted us that they have not been given the advice that they expected. We will continue to feed that back to the Government.

The Convener: It may seem a simplistic view that I am taking, but the lack of referrals seems to make the business case for having a helpline in Scotland.

Lynn Welsh: Before coming to the EHRC, I worked at the Disability Rights Commission and our helpline was based in Stratford. It was a good helpline and staff worked really hard, but it was difficult to meet the needs of Scotland. We fought extremely hard to get a Scottish helpline in the EHRC, so it was a bit heartbreaking on a personal level when it disappeared again. We must now concentrate all our efforts on getting the existing helpline to work as best it can for Scotland. That is a top priority for me and my team, as we found it incredibly difficult not to be getting the cases and information that we needed.

The Convener: On average, how many referrals did you get per month before the new service started?

Lynn Welsh: We were in the lucky position of not having to rely only on detailed referrals from the helpline. The helpline staff sat in the same office as us and popped round the door to get

information from the lawyers and to see whether cases were of interest to us. On a daily basis, we were in discussion with, giving support to and receiving information from the staff of the Scottish helpline, when it existed, and we got regular referrals from them.

The Convener: You say “regular”. Could you give us an estimate?

Lynn Welsh: I can give you proper figures after the meeting, if that would be helpful.

The Convener: It would be very helpful if you could do that. Thank you.

John Mason: We have spent quite a lot of time on the helpline, so I will not ask any more questions about that. In your written submission, there are eight bullet points about Scottish projects for 2013-14, which Mr Pringle has expanded on. Some are quite specific, but some seem a bit vague. I am interested in how we measure the outcomes of those projects—an issue that has been touched on. The one dealing with bullying in schools is pretty clear cut, whereas the final one—

“we will implement an ambitious and country-wide transfer-of-expertise programme”—

seems a little vague to me. I assume that there is a bit more detail behind that. Is there?

Alastair Pringle: Yes. We have just evaluated what we did last year in the transfer of expertise. I will hand over to Lynn Welsh on that, as it is her area of work.

In undertaking our work, we bring together relevant folk from across the Scotland directorate and from elsewhere when we need to bring in expertise. We generally have legal, policy and, if required, parliamentary input in scoping out exactly what we plan to achieve in the year and what outcomes we expect to see. We have pretty rigorous reporting mechanisms in place—risk registers and the like, as you would expect from any functional organisation—and we regularly review the work that we are undertaking to ensure that it has achieved its aim.

The bullet points were designed to give just a flavour of some of the Scotland-specific work that is going on. I would be happy to share any of that with you. Behind each bullet point substantial work is going on, which is backed up with evidence on why we would do the work, what impact we would expect to achieve and, if we are not achieving that, the reasons why.

It is challenging that an organisation such as the Equality and Human Rights Commission cannot deliver equality on its own but must work through a range of agencies, front-line services and partners, be they Government or voluntary sector. We cannot necessarily demonstrate clearly the

impact that we have had on the front line, but we can demonstrate the improvement in other agencies’ knowledge and awareness of equality law, for example, and their ability to provide improved services to their constituents. That is the idea behind the transfer of expertise programme.

I am happy to expand on any of the other bullet points. We are in the process of working each of them up into a fully formed project plan for the year ahead. We expect those pieces of work to be integrated into the GB plan as a whole, as the Scotland-specific elements.

Lynn Welsh: We have a very detailed plan for the transfer of expertise, as Alastair Pringle said. This year, we have undertaken a quality evaluation as well as a quantity evaluation. It is easy to measure quantity—for example, if we run a training session and 17 people turn up—but we have also produced an in-depth quality report on the subject, which we would be happy to let you see. We have already planned a programme of events for the coming year. Last year, we ran 14 events and we will run another nine or 10 events this year. The plan is quite detailed.

John Mason: Mr Pringle, you say that you have reasons for looking at each of those issues. Mr Finnie asked how much input the union has had. That is fine, but I was wondering how much equality groups, such as ethnic minority groups, have guided your priorities for the coming few years.

Alastair Pringle: We have a fairly on-going arrangement with a range of third sector and equality organisations and others who help to inform and shape some of our priorities for the year. In the past, the commission might have failed to some extent to have a rigorous process around which it built its business plan priorities, and I do not think that our process this year is ideal, to be honest.

Since November, I have been involved in work to clearly state why we do what we do and why we do not do what we do not do. I want to be clearer. We get evidence and information and requests for action from all over the place and we have a research and information function at the GB level. We had such a function at the Scotland level but, unfortunately, we have lost that capacity for the moment. However, we plan to address that this year. We have a range of mechanisms for identifying potential action that we would like to undertake. That includes stakeholder engagement with the voluntary sector and equality groups, individual requests for action, and our own research, information and intelligence such as that which we get from the triennial review.

Most of the work that we are doing is based on known intelligence. The triennial review told us

what the significant inequalities were in Britain and that was broken down to give us those in Scotland. In addition, during the past year or two, we have looked at any other relevant surveys and census data, which all help to inform our range of potential projects.

In Scotland, we then engaged with the Scotland committee of the EHRC, which is the statutory committee of the commission, to identify and prioritise a smaller number projects of work. About half of those are continuing pieces of work from last year, such as the human trafficking work. That is a follow-on, because we still have a role to play, as we do with the disability harassment work.

In the proposals for next year's business plan, how the voices of stakeholders have helped to shape and inform alongside other research information and advice will be much clearer.

John Mason: You used the word "voices". Some voices are louder than others, so presumably some equality groups speak louder than others. I assume that the commission does not reflect just how loud someone shouts but reflects what it considers are the main issues.

Alastair Pringle: Yes, and that also needs to be assessed alongside our unique role and function to see whether it makes sense for us to proceed with work and whether it is of a strategic nature. We have to decide whether undertaking a specific piece of work will have strategic impact across the country, which is an issue both for our legal work and for our programme of activity. We also have to look at whether people are already involved in the field and ask whether there is a place for the commission to do work. We go through a decision-making process that asks a range of questions before we agree to do a piece of work.

John Mason: Do you feel that you have to look at all the eight protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010?

Alastair Pringle: Not necessarily. As part of the public sector equality duty, we have the Scotland-specific duties that set explicit requirements for equality outcomes for all protected characteristics. If an equality outcome is not being set, we have look at why. That partly sets the framework for addressing the range of protected characteristics.

The same goes for us: if we feel that there is a gap or that we are not addressing a certain area, we question ourselves and ask why. Inevitably, it is either because significant work on the matter is already under way or because we do not have a unique place or role to play at the time.

10:00

As for GB and Scotland-specific work, we have been asking a statutory question about devolved

issues: is this piece of work relevant to or different in Scotland and, if so, how will that be reflected at a GB level or locally? We have also carried out a high-level equality impact assessment to ensure that we are not weighted towards one particular group or another, or, if we are, that we have reasonable evidence behind that.

John Mason: There will be certain differences in Scotland; for example, sectarianism and anti-Irish racism are probably greater here than elsewhere in the UK. Are you taking that into account?

Alastair Pringle: Yes.

John Mason: Do specific areas such as the bullying in Scottish schools that was referred to come from a particular group or is it a wider issue? Will you be looking at all the protected characteristics that could be involved in relation to bullying in schools?

Alastair Pringle: There is anecdotal evidence as well as evidence from organisations such as LGBT Youth Scotland about bullying in schools and concern has been expressed that those issues are not being addressed. We would generally consider the range of potential equality issues in, say, schools and then make a judgment based on some of the criteria that I have already mentioned, such as our ability to play a unique role or whether there are opportunities to offer advice, guidance or support. I should add that those things have not been fully worked up; they are draft proposals that are going through a process and will not be finalised and taken forward until the end of March. We have been going through a range of processes to find out whether we have enough evidence.

I also point out that in such areas of work we will not always have the data. As the committee will have found over the years, it is at times difficult to get data on issues such as prejudice-based bullying for the very reason that many people who have been discriminated against or disadvantaged do not want to come forward. We are basing some of that programme of work on unofficial reporting or specific issues that particular organisations have raised.

John Mason: I would absolutely support anything that tackles bullying of all sorts in schools. The lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community will, of course, raise that issue but there is also concern among the religious community that kids with a religious commitment, too, get bullied at school. My only hope is that you will look at all of that and not just approach the issue from one angle.

Alastair Pringle: Absolutely. It does not matter who they are targeted at: prejudice and

discrimination have the same root. The perpetrators are less interested in the difference.

The same applies to all our work. We initially considered doing a piece of work on disabled people's access to banking. However, the real issue is people's ability to access advice and support services online, which affects, among others, people who might not necessarily understand English, older people who do not access the internet or people in rural parts of Scotland. There are, of course, issues about internet access and uptake in certain parts of Scotland. As I said, our interest is in focusing on and examining in depth an area where we might be able to develop measurable improvements and solutions and consider transferability at scale. We think that that is the best way in which we can operate with our limited resources.

In our work on schools, we might well use reporting of prejudice-based bullying as a proxy for how well schools are doing across the piece, but we will consider all aspects of discriminatory bullying.

John Mason: So in five years' time, will you have been successful if you have done your job and achieved your programme of work, or if Scotland has become more equal?

Alastair Pringle: Ideally, our hope is that Scotland will be more equal and fair. That is certainly our aspiration. The items in our programme of work are all small attempts to tackle a big and complex problem.

John Mason: Given that your resources have been reduced, should we be worried that Scotland is not going to be a more equal society in five years' time?

Alastair Pringle: That question is difficult to answer at this point.

John Mason: Thank you.

James Dornan: I would like to think that my questions will not be quite as difficult. Will you expand on the relationship between your organisation and the Scottish Human Rights Commission, particularly given your organisation's change in circumstances?

Alastair Pringle: The Scottish Human Rights Commission was established by and is accountable to the Scottish Parliament, and it deals primarily with devolved aspects of human rights. As a GB organisation, we deal with reserved aspects of human rights at a GB level. If only it was as clear cut as that, life would probably be easier.

We have a good working relationship with the Scottish Human Rights Commission. We can get involved in areas of work in Scotland on devolved

issues with its permission. Our human trafficking inquiry work is an example of an area in which we felt that we had the skills, expertise and capacity to take forward a piece of work that spanned both reserved and devolved aspects of policy and legislation, and we did that with the SHRC's support.

We meet the SHRC regularly and we have taken forward some pieces of collaborative work. Currently, we are working on equality and human rights impact assessment activity—I think that I mentioned that earlier. We have a different set of powers, and our memorandum of understanding says that we use jointly our powers and abilities to address equality and human rights issues in Scotland. Non-discrimination is a key element of human rights principles and the Human Rights Act 1998, so it is incredibly important that we can work together collaboratively.

Recently, we met the SHRC to look at the proposed Scottish national action plan for human rights. If the SHRC is to achieve the ambitions that have been set out, we will without a doubt need to work with it at a GB level, because some reserved issues are intertwined with some of the areas that it is keen to look at.

We have a director of human rights who is based in our London office and we work closely with them and the Scottish Human Rights Commission. We are planning a meeting quite soon to share where we are at with our business planning at a GB level and to ensure that we can work together as collaboratively as possible.

James Dornan: Given the budget cut, is there scope for closer collaboration? On a number of issues, the crossover is clear, but is there a case for closer collaboration between the two organisations to amalgamate the expertise?

Alastair Pringle: Yes. We will continue to work as closely as we can, but we have different powers, so it makes sense for us to maintain our own identity.

Next month, there is to be an interesting conference. Little has been done so far to research the impact of bringing equality and human rights together, but a major piece of research has been undertaken that will report next month. It will be useful to look at that. There is an assumption that we should work together more closely but, at times, because of the way in which equality law is set up in terms of protected characteristics, its foundations, and the more person-centred but universal aspects of human rights, it is not easy to articulate that connection, so it is not always easy to develop a programme of work that addresses both aspects. One aspect is oriented to the needs of groups of people who have experienced prejudice and discrimination in

society and involves understanding why that has happened and how we can address it through a range of levers. The other involves some of the broader, more principle-based aspects of human rights.

Without a doubt, we work together pretty well. We worked together even better when we were all based in the same office in Glasgow, but sadly we have had to downsize a bit. However, we have regular meetings and, as I said, we have collaborative work. I sit on the writing group for the Scottish national action plan for human rights. We work together well both strategically and at officer level. I cannot see any obvious areas in which we could, at this stage, work more closely without muddying the water.

James Dornan: Thank you. I look forward to the action plan.

John Finnie: I have a couple of questions, just to get some information on the record. The first is for Ms Welsh, who mentioned the Disability Rights Commission's helpline. My understanding is that Sitel, which now has the contract for the EHRC helpline, won the contract to operate the DRC helpline, but that the helpline was eventually taken back in house because the service was so poor and non-responsive. Is that the case? You might not wish to comment on the reasons, but can you confirm that the helpline was taken back in house?

Lynn Welsh: No. My memory is that we gave a contract to Sitel, and we then based some of our staff with Sitel to give it the support that it needed to improve its service. It was not taken back in house. Sitel still provided the advice and had the contract, but we gave it support. When the DRC ended and the EHRC was set up, we then brought the helpline fully in house.

John Finnie: I am confused about whether that is a yes or a no, but we will perhaps leave that one.

In answer to Siobhan McMahon's questions about equal pay, we heard about research staff, although I cannot recall whether it was Ms Welsh or Mr Pringle who talked about that. Will you explain who those research staff will be?

Lynn Welsh: Our intention is to put out a tender to bring in a consultancy of researchers. We will tell the consultancy what we want it to look at, and it will then do the work of checking that all the outcomes in the publications comply with a set of criteria that we will provide. In effect, the consultancy will analyse the information and we will then use that analysis.

John Finnie: Has that always been the practice?

Lynn Welsh: Yes—we do that for such big pieces of work. We normally get consultants to do that research for us.

John Finnie: So that work is not being done at the expense of staff.

Alastair Pringle: No. It is standard practice across the commission to contract out big pieces of work or work for which we do not have sufficient expertise.

John Finnie: My understanding is that the Public and Commercial Services Union had a proposed structure that included policy and research officers, with a staff complement of 21. Why was that not progressed?

Alastair Pringle: The reality is that a range of voluntary exit schemes were available to staff and staff have left for new posts. As we have said, in June 2012, we were working towards a potential staff complement of 10, so it was a very difficult—

John Finnie: What was the basis of that? Clearly, people take the opportunity to move if they fear that their posts will go but, as we heard, subsequently the complement turned out to be 17 or 17.5 posts.

Alastair Pringle: The news that we would not have to lose any more staff became available only in December last year, when our final budget agreement was made. The intention had been to run a couple of voluntary exit schemes to try to manage the expected cut in our budget. It was only in December of last year, when the budgets were announced, that we became aware that we could keep the level of staff that we have across GB. That did not allow for a clearly planned set of departures.

We are working towards agreeing a new operating model—

John Finnie: Sorry, but did you say that there was sufficient funding to retain the existing staff complement?

Alastair Pringle: As of December 2012, when the budget was announced, we had in the region of 200 staff, and the budget that was announced for 2013-14 and 2014-15 allowed us to retain that level of staff. Up to that point, we were still working towards a worst-case scenario of ending up with in the region of 10 staff in Scotland.

John Finnie: Do you intend to recruit staff?

Alastair Pringle: We currently have 15 full-time equivalents in the Scotland directorate. Near the end of last year, we lost two staff who went for new posts elsewhere—not through a voluntary exit scheme. We are in discussions at a GB level to recruit to those posts and, in principle, we plan to do that.

10:15

John Finnie: Where does that sit with the model of 21 posts that was proposed by the trade union?

Alastair Pringle: I do not think that we were able to afford or commit to 21 posts. The unions were suggesting that we should work towards a model of 21 staff. In reality, we were working towards the potential of having only 10 staff. That was what the unions aspired to, against what we believed we were going to have money available for.

I will check with Ian Acheson, because I came in nearly at the end—

John Finnie: The chronology is important. As I said, if people think that posts are going, they will take the opportunity to take up other posts. If you are saying that there is sufficient resource to retain the original complement, I wonder why—

Alastair Pringle: Not the original complement; the complement that we had as of December—which is 200 staff across the organisation—not June.

John Finnie: I do not wish to be parochial, but our remit is exclusively to do with Scotland. I am trying to understand what the complement in Scotland was.

Ian Acheson: That is a fair point. To reiterate, in spring last year, based on the opening proposals for our budget by GEO, we were having to plan for a significant reduction in staff. In anticipation of that, it would be only fair to offer staff the best options, one of which would be the voluntary exit scheme, which would be based on the anticipated head count—at that time—for the next two years. That scheme closed before we received our final budget settlement offer, which was the result of significant work that we did to argue for the retention of more staff capacity.

Therefore, in the spring, we had to plan for a significant reduction in staff. That reduction in staff did not materialise, and we won an agreement—late in December—for a budget settlement for next year and the year after for roughly 200 staff. That meant that we would not have to make any staff compulsorily redundant in the next two years.

We started in a position in which we were much more pessimistic about the head count that we would need.

John Finnie: What was the head count for staff in Scotland at that point?

Lynn Welsh: It was roughly 20. From memory, the union came up with a figure that was slightly more than the number of staff that we already had in Scotland.

John Finnie: One more.

Lynn Welsh: Yes, one more. The union was basically saying that we should retain what we had. People then left, through VE and to go to other jobs. No one has been made compulsorily redundant since then.

John Finnie: So five of the 20 have left.

Lynn Welsh: I am not sure of the breakdown between full-time equivalents and part-time staff but, roughly, yes.

John Finnie: Would it be possible to share that information and the chronology with the committee? That would help advise us in our deliberations.

Alastair Pringle: Absolutely.

Marco Biagi: You said that you had used consultants for research work, presumably on a contractual basis. Did you use individuals or organisations? If you used organisations, which ones?

Alastair Pringle: We regularly use consultants. We could share that information with you after the meeting rather than reeling off a list just now.

Marco Biagi: Are the consultants predominantly individual researchers or organisations?

Alastair Pringle: Can we come back to you on that? I know the names of some organisations that we have worked with over the years. I think that, primarily, the consultants are organisations.

Ian Acheson: We routinely commission academic research. That is a specialism that we rely on and we have never had the capacity to do it in-house.

The Convener: I thank our witnesses for giving us evidence. I now suspend the meeting.

10:19

Meeting suspended.

10:30

On resuming—

Work Programme

The Convener: Item 2 is consideration of the committee's work programme. We have been asked by the Minority Ethnic Carers of People Project to sponsor an event in June 2013, which coincides with our sponsorship of its "Moving Minds" exhibition, which focuses on Gypsy Traveller carers and is timed to coincide with carers week. Members have before them a brief paper on the event. Do we agree to sponsor it?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: That concludes our formal meeting. Our next meeting will take place on 7 March. Because it will involve consideration of our draft report on our inquiry into where Gypsy Travellers live, it will take place in private.

Meeting closed at 10:30.

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