



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE

Thursday 23 May 2013

Session 4

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EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE

16th Meeting 2013, Session 4

CONVENER

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DEPUTY CONVENER

*Marco Biagi (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Christian Allard (North East Scotland) (SNP)

*John Finnie (Highlands and Islands) (Ind)

*Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con)

*John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)

Siobhan McMahon (Central Scotland) (Lab)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Julie Ann Bilotti (Scottish Government)

Susan Bolt (Scottish Government)

Angela Constance (Minister for Youth Employment)

Eileen Flanagan (Scottish Government)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Douglas Thornton

LOCATION

Committee Room 4

Scottish Parliament

Equal Opportunities Committee

Thursday 23 May 2013

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

Interests

The Convener (Mary Fee): Good morning and welcome to the Equal Opportunities Committee's 16th meeting in 2013. I remind everyone either to turn electronic devices to flight mode or to switch them off completely.

Around the table, along with members and witnesses, are the clerking and research team, the official reporters and the broadcasting services staff, and around the room we are supported by the security office staff. My name is Mary Fee, and I am the committee convener. Other committee members will introduce themselves in turn.

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

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

Christian Allard (North East Scotland) (SNP): I am a new member of the Scottish Parliament for North East Scotland.

Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con): I am also a member for North East Scotland.

John Finnie (Highlands and Islands) (Ind): I am an MSP for the Highlands and Islands.

The Convener: Agenda item 1 is a declaration of interests in accordance with section 3 of the "Code of Conduct for Members of the Scottish Parliament". I invite Christian Allard to declare any interests that are relevant to the committee's remit. Any declaration should be brief but sufficiently detailed to make clear the nature of the interest.

Christian Allard: I declare an interest as a member of Reach—the Association for Children with Upper Limb Deficiency. My daughter was born with only one arm 20 years ago, so I have been a member of the charity for 20 years.

Decision on Taking Business in Private

09:31

The Convener: Under agenda item 2, the committee is asked to decide whether to take item 5, on the forthcoming legislation on marriage and civil partnerships, in private. Is that agreed?

Members *indicated agreement.*

John Mason: Is it item 4 or item 5?

The Convener: It is item 5. The numbering of some of the papers has changed.

Women and Work

09:32

The Convener: Agenda item 3 is ministerial evidence on women and work. I welcome Angela Constance, the Minister for Youth Employment, and our other witnesses, whom I ask to introduce themselves.

Julie Ann Bilotti (Scottish Government): I work in the employability policy team in the Scottish Government.

Susan Bolt (Scottish Government): I am from the early learning and childcare team in the Scottish Government.

Eileen Flanagan (Scottish Government): I am from the Scottish Government's equality unit.

The Convener: The minister will make opening remarks.

The Minister for Youth Employment (Angela Constance): I welcome the opportunity to appear before the committee to discuss the issues that face women in Scotland, whether they are looking for or are already in work. I know that in evidence to the inquiry a number of clear themes have emerged, which echo the topics that were raised and discussed so enthusiastically at last year's women's employment summit. I believe strongly that tackling those challenges requires us all to work closely together in all levels of government and across all parts of Scottish society. I want to make it clear that the Scottish Government is determined to drive, wherever we can, long-term change to help all Scotland's women to fulfil their potential.

The Children and Young People (Scotland) Bill, which was introduced in Parliament on 17 April 2013, contains provisions to increase the amount of, and flexibility in, early learning and childcare. It represents a significant step towards achieving our ambition to develop a high-quality universal system of early learning and childcare that is affordable and flexible and meets the needs of all children, parents and families.

The First Minister has indicated that a transformational shift in childcare at all levels should be one of the first tasks of an independent Scotland. To support this, he has asked the Council of Economic Advisers to consider options for delivering and funding a high-quality universal early learning and childcare system in Scotland, along with the associated social and economic impacts and benefits.

Occupational segregation—another issue that has been raised in the committee's inquiry— affects society as a whole, so addressing it

requires societal change. At last year's women's employment summit, the First Minister announced careerwise Scotland, which is an initiative that will run for more than two years and will help us to understand what we can do to encourage more young women to pursue careers in science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

Occupational segregation is a much wider challenge than STEM-related issues. The challenge is also about valuing the sectors that women are traditionally drawn to, making sure that career opportunities are open to all, enabling young people to understand the nature of the labour market and how to make informed choices, and ensuring that employers recognise the economic and social value of a balanced workforce. That very much requires a cross-Government approach. We have reconvened the cross-directorate occupational segregation working group to consider what action we can take on the recommendations from the women's employment summit and the Royal Society of Edinburgh report, "Tapping all our Talents".

Last year's summit on flexible working highlighted good practice across the public and private sectors. We cannot force private sector employers to adopt flexible working practices, but we can encourage change and lead by example. That is why we sponsored the Institute of Directors to introduce as part of its annual awards ceremony a new award that recognises flexible and family-friendly working practices.

In particular, it is important that we encourage information sharing and peer mentoring between big business and small and medium-sized enterprises, which often feel unable to offer flexible working opportunities because it will affect the running of the business. We are exploring that matter and would welcome any thoughts that the committee may have on it.

On enterprise, although numbers are rising, women still account only for 14 per cent of SME employers and 30 per cent of self-employed people. Last September's summit was the catalyst for a series of seminars between October 2012 and April 2013 covering a range of areas for action, including effective networking and the celebration and role modelling of women in enterprise. Professor Sara Carter, who at the summit led the discussion on women in enterprise, has led all the seminars and is bringing together recommendations for practical actions for the Government to pursue.

I have not had time in this short address to cover all the activity across Government following the women's employment summit last year. However, it is important to stress that I do not see that as a one-off event. Furthermore, I most certainly do not see it as a talking shop, so we

must pursue follow-up actions. To ensure that we keep an emphasis on that priority area, I have convened a small group that will help me to monitor action across Government and offer advice on policy development. I intend to report fully to Parliament on progress later this year.

The summit was just the first step; we accept that we do not have all the answers at this time, which is why we welcome the committee's inquiry. I look forward to discussing the key issues and themes and to considering further how we might work together towards a common goal.

The Convener: I thank the minister for those very welcome opening remarks. We move to questions from members; Marco Biagi will begin with questions on childcare.

Marco Biagi: For better or worse, the reality of our society is that the majority of childcare responsibilities fall on women. How much will the changes that are proposed in the Children and Young People (Scotland) Bill help, especially in the light of the United Kingdom Government's changes to childcare funding through tax credits?

Angela Constance: In theory, we all want childcare to be an issue for all parents—we want the care, concerns and issues to apply equally to men and women. Of course—I do not think that this is a controversial statement—the reality in today's society is that a lack of affordable and accessible childcare will have a far greater impact on women's participation in the labour market than on men's. As for how we change perceptions about that, I believe that childcare should be an issue for both men and women and I think that the national parenting strategy will help to carve out a different culture to change attitudes.

The Children and Young People (Scotland) Bill is an important and substantial step in how we deal with our infrastructure. At a practical level, I think that we are starting in the right place by capitalising on a universal service that is currently available to all three and four-year-olds. In extending access to pre-school provision, we are trying to ramp up provision of hours. Between 2007 and next year, we will have achieved a 45 per cent increase in the number of hours, once the 600 hours commitment is introduced. I believe that the Children and Young People (Scotland) Bill is the right place to start. I know that there are many places from where we could have started, but I think that for practical reasons it was best for us to start with three and four-year-olds.

Although there has been a lot of debate on the impact of welfare reform on equality groups and on women in particular, the effect of the changes to tax credits that the UK Government announced in its recent budget statement is still quite unclear. At this stage, it appears to me that those changes

will disproportionately benefit not so much those who are on the lowest incomes but those who are on greater incomes. However, we will look more closely at the detail on that as it becomes available.

As committee members do, I know that there has also been a debate about provision for two-year-olds, for whom different provision has been proposed down south. For the Scottish Government, the way forward that we want to pursue is that we do not want to compromise on the quality of childcare, so maintaining child ratios is very important to us.

Marco Biagi: That slightly pre-empts my next question, which was to ask you to contrast the Scottish and English approaches. However, given that the question of a universal approach versus a more targeted approach has come up in evidence, perhaps you could give your view on why the universal approach is the right one at this stage.

Angela Constance: Given that our aspiration is for a universal early learning and childcare system—that is what we are aiming for, making steps towards and striving for—it is common sense that we start with a universal approach. I know that there is much debate around that, but I think that a universal approach to childcare and early learning for all children is preferable. I understand the arguments about having a more targeted approach, but I believe that in our work with young children it is important not to have stigmatised services. To build that change in culture and aspiration for society, we want a universal childcare system, so I think that we should start as we mean to go on.

Marco Biagi: You have referred to the transformational change that a universal childcare system can bring about. What is the 10-year vision in detail?

Angela Constance: We are working through the detail just now. I think that an important development is the involvement of the Council of Economic Advisers; we should not undersell the economic gains or benefits of childcare. Childcare is not just a social issue or a women's issue. It is an infrastructure issue that is imperative to our economy, and we should see the two things in parallel.

09:45

It is important that, as well as articulating the benefits of childcare and early learning to children's cognitive development and to families and women, we should articulate the economic arguments. If we look at the employment rate of women from 1992 to 2007, it increased from around 48 to 55 per cent. That brought—in terms of economic output and gross value added—

around £8.5 billion to the economy. We must start marshalling some of the economic arguments for childcare.

On the practicalities, and to address your question more directly, the Council of Economic Advisers will look closely at international best practice. We have focused on eight countries. We want to emulate the best. We need to look at models of provision—there will be a great debate about that—and how to fund that provision. We need to get into the guts of the model and the funding to establish what the next steps would be.

Marco Biagi: It would be interesting to have that list of eight countries, but I do not suppose that you have it in front of you.

Angela Constance: Many of the countries are European. I am sure that Denmark is on the list. Can you remember, Susan?

Susan Bolt: The countries are Scotland, England, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Slovenia, the Netherlands and France.

The Convener: A key issue that came out of the women's employment summit was the lack of childcare for children up to the age of 14. It constantly frustrates me that, when we have conversations about childcare, we focus on pre-school children. Provision of childcare for children up to 14 is a huge issue. What can be done to increase the provision for older children?

Another issue that came out of the summit, which I have personal experience of, was that there are large numbers of women clustered in the retail sector, for example, who are, because of changes in working patterns, increasingly working various shifts, but no childcare is available to them. Women are put in a position of, for example, not being able to take up extra hours or changes to shifts; they have to leave work because there is no childcare. How can that be solved? If childcare is to become truly part of our infrastructure, we must have a system that not only accommodates children up to the age of five or people who are, for example, working from 7 in the morning until 6 at night, but which covers the gamut of working hours.

Angela Constance: That is part of the reason why we need to look at international best practice. The convener makes a good point about older children. We should not forget them and should be talking about out-of-school care, breakfast clubs and wraparound care.

In relation to the here and now, funds have been identified via the third sector early intervention fund and the strategic partnership funding. That comes under the auspices of Aileen Campbell, the Minister for Children and Young People. We are funding significant organisations in that sector, and

some of the funds have been targeted at out-of-school care provision. Out-of-school care is particularly pertinent, but there are additional challenges in rural areas, in which perhaps there is less bricks-and-mortar infrastructure. We are looking at more innovative childminding solutions. Of course, childminding can be an enterprise for some women and, indeed, some men.

Your point about older children was well made, convener. I think that what we currently have for three and four-year-olds is the best place to start to look at having the biggest impact, but you are absolutely right that the issue goes far wider than just three and four-year-olds. You will not get any argument from me on that front.

Flexibility and the hours that childcare is available are highly pertinent. Many public sector workers—I am thinking about those in the national health service—work weekends and out of hours and have very early starts. I do not know many nurseries that open at 6 am, or whenever. That is an additional challenge and barrier for parents, who have to make quite intricate and specific arrangements. Our aspiration is for affordable, accessible and flexible childcare, and there is a huge amount of needs to consider.

An organisation called CALA—the Care and Learning Alliance—tends to do a lot of its work in more rural areas, for which it looks at bespoke solutions.

The Convener: John Mason has questions about schools.

John Mason: I start with the role of schools when young people choose careers. Obviously, there are many factors in why boys and girls choose particular careers, including their experiences, their families, what their friends have done and what is available where they live. How much influence can schools have?

Angela Constance: Schools have a massive influence. That is stating the obvious; it is not rocket science. I also believe that with changes to the curriculum there are huge opportunities for us to capitalise on. The whole ethos change in curriculum for excellence is about contextualised learning—learning that is relevant to life and work. A lot of the work that I am involved in as the Minister for Youth Employment is about better connectivity between all phases of education and the world of work. We have a huge opportunity to better prepare and inform than ever before young people about the world of work. That gives us the context and opportunity to start to challenge stereotypes and to make sure that young women in particular have their eyes opened to the range of opportunities that are available.

Schools are important because we need to engage early with young women in particular. The

earlier we engage with young people about career choices the better. It is not about corralling them down one route or another. However, if we wait until people have chosen subjects, perhaps that will be a little bit late. There is a lot of work with STEM ambassadors and in primary schools.

There are huge opportunities in the work that we want to do with careerwise and young girls, in particular, and with the changes in curriculum for excellence.

John Mason: I agree that we do not want to corral young people. However, I sometimes get the feeling that we are at the other extreme and that, if a young person says that they quite fancy doing something, the school helps them to do it without any knowledge of, or guidance on, where the jobs are at the end of the road.

We have heard repeatedly that there are jobs in engineering and jobs in the North Sea, but I meet young people who have been through university and done degrees in politics or something whose schools seemed not to have told them—boys and girls—where the jobs are. That is perhaps patchy, because some schools are doing quite well. However, my feeling—I do not know whether it is also your feeling—is that some schools could do more to encourage young people along a direction.

Angela Constance: That is also my feeling. There are schools and areas in which there is great practice—in a primary school in my constituency, when I was asked by an 11-year-old girl about modern apprenticeships, I could have sung with joy—but there are other experiences. Careerwise seeks to collaborate and extend good practice.

There are many examples of specialist projects. To be fair to schools, we need to make it easier for them. There is a huge role for careers services and all teachers to play in informing young people. Subjects are meant to be learned in the context of how they link with other subjects and with real-life learning. There is a huge opportunity for all that learning to be linked with visible careers.

We also need to work with parents because they have a huge influence on choices. We know that young people are influenced by their peers, but we need to do a lot of work with parents on young women in STEM-related careers or careers in construction.

John Mason: You mentioned careers services. Those are clearly important. If young people have a relationship with the careers teachers, they will, I presume, be guided by them.

Is it important that we try to get more women role models and role models in general into the schools? Again, I think that their presence is a bit

patchy. If kids see a woman engineer or police officer coming into the school, that might encourage them to go down those routes a bit more.

Angela Constance: Yes, absolutely. Often, children learn through what they see. We must use education and the curriculum to counter some of the mass imaging to which young people are exposed in the media.

The Construction Industry Training Board and ConstructionSkills have construction-specific careers advisers. However, we really need all careers coaches to be conversant with the labour market, able to challenge stereotypes and able to give good advice about where jobs are today and will be tomorrow.

Women role models are powerful. We fund the Scottish resource centre for women in science, engineering and technology, which is based at Edinburgh Napier University. It has done a lot of work on promoting STEM careers to young women and supporting young women who are pursuing such careers. The centre has also mapped where good practice is and where the gaps are, which will be helpful in taking forward the careerwise initiative. We are funding project workers as part of that initiative. That is about trying to get a consistent level of activity in schools. Particularly in relation to oil and gas and energy, that should not be a phenomenon for schools in the north-east alone.

Lots of work is going on in the context of STEMEC—the STEM education committee—which will oversee careerwise. One of the beauties of having the strategic group on women and work is that it can have an overview and look for overall change, as opposed to piecemeal change.

10:00

I hope to reassure the committee that the issue is not just being pursued by me—one minister. The agenda is important to Dr Allan, the Minister for Learning, Science and Scotland's Languages, in the context of what happens in schools. Shona Robison, the Minister for Commonwealth Games and Sport, has responsibility for equality. There is also Aileen Campbell, the Minister for Children and Young People. There is a concerted cross-Government effort to address issues, whether we are talking about schools, childcare or broader occupational segregation.

John Mason: I accept that we have been expecting you to answer any question on anything, although in some areas the responsibility will lie more with another minister.

In relation to schools, teachers' working practices are an issue. Witnesses have suggested

that, although part-time work is available in schools, the system is very inflexible. A teacher might be able to work a half day or job share, but there is not much flexible working, which is what some people want. Can you talk about the issue and say whether there is room for improvement?

Angela Constance: I am sure that there is always room for improvement in the area. I am probably not the minister who is best placed to speak about teachers' terms and conditions and working practices. Part of a teacher's continuing professional development should be about exposure to the world of work and what is happening in the labour market.

I thought that you were going to ask me about work experience—I was thinking tangentially. Schools in particular have the opportunity to secure more consistent work experience for young people, which can expose young women to employment opportunities that they might not have considered.

John Mason: It has been suggested to the committee that legislation might be part of the answer to the problem. Would all legislation in the area have to come from Westminster? For example, if we wanted to require jobs to be advertised with the possibility of flexible or part-time working, I assume that that would have to be done through Westminster legislation, rather than Scottish legislation. Will you confirm that?

You said that we can lead by example. Could we say that all public service jobs in Scotland for which we are responsible must be offered with the possibility of part-time or flexible working unless there is a very good reason not to do that? Is that something that we could do?

Angela Constance: There are many areas in which the Scottish Government leads by example. The example that springs to mind is the living wage. When I go about my work as a minister, I am aware that many officials give details in their emails of the days and times when they are not available. For many women officials, such flexible working is to do with their family commitments. As an employer, we can lead by example.

John Mason: Is that consistent throughout the public sector?

Angela Constance: Probably not. Without looking at a detailed audit of who does what, I can say that there will be variation across the public sector. These are matters for public sector employers such as local authorities but, given that employment law is reserved, the scope that the Scottish Government has is limited to leading by example as an employer and using our role and our engagement with the private sector to promote and encourage cultural change. A lot of that is to do with marshalling arguments about how a

diverse workforce and flexible working are good for business. If we are underutilising more than half the population while some industries and sectors are facing a skills shortage, there is a role for Government in matching—in helping people into work and helping companies to sort out their skills shortages. In that context, there are opportunities to pursue the agenda.

A concrete example of that is the work of the energy skills action group—I do not want to stray off the subject too much, but the issues are very much interrelated; the strategic group on women and work has had the challenge of coming up with streams of work and biting things off in a practical sense, because things are so circular and interrelated. The energy skills action group is working with industry leadership groups on a refresh of the skills investment plans. There are skills investment plans for many key growth sectors in the economy, which are to do with how Government works with industry to help it to meet its workforce and skills needs. As part of the refresh of the plan, there is a dialogue about gender and how we get more women into oil and gas and into renewables. Renewables are a fairly new industry, so we need to consider how we start off on a better footing.

I hope that that is a more concrete example of what this Government can do.

John Mason: I agree that there is a big picture and we have to start somewhere. We heard from witnesses that too many employers—in the private and public sectors—think in 40-hour slots, when they might need someone for 20 or 30 hours, rather than 40. The whole system needs to move a bit.

Marco Biagi: There is a specific proposal that when a job in the public sector is advertised, it should be proactively advertised as potentially part time or flexible, to get over the problem of people being afraid to ask. Do you think that the idea has merit? Might you consider it?

Angela Constance: For many jobs, there is no practical reason why there could not be a job share or flexible or part-time working. I suppose that it is often easier for employers just to troddle down the same old tried-and-tested route of seeking what they have always sought when they advertise jobs. How could we promote better practice and more openness to considering alternatives, across the public sector? The Scottish Government is one public sector employer, but I think that that is an important direction of travel. Eileen Flanagan might be able to say something about how we might, as a public sector employer, encourage other public sector and private sector employers.

Eileen Flanagan: I was just thinking about the public sector equality duty and the Scottish regulations in that regard. There has been strong movement by authorities and organisations that are covered by the duty to consider their staffing policies. Many organisations have developed an outcome to do with staffing—I think that the Equality and Human Rights Commission will be able to develop work on that as the system beds in.

As an organisation, we are working towards a few outcomes on equality. A few of them are about our own staff. Police Scotland has an equality outcome on staffing and how it will develop the diversity of its workforce. That will be replicated and can be measured through the indicators that sit under those outcomes. That will enable the diversity of the staff to be examined. In future years, we will be able to use that as a benchmark and move forward from it.

The Convener: Christian Allard has some questions on the energy sector. After that, John Finnie will ask questions about the process and, I suspect, a few more questions about the crossover of portfolios.

Christian Allard: Minister, I am delighted that you have talked about the energy sector so much this morning. What actions has the Scottish Government taken so far on careers advice on the industry? I agree with John Mason that it is a bit patchy, particularly in schools. What do you see the Scottish Government's role being in giving every child—particularly young women—the same opportunity to enter the energy industry? In particular, what is your interaction with local authorities? How can local authorities all over Scotland have the same system for engaging with the energy sector? The sector is now opening offices all over Scotland, not only in the north-east. What is your role, what has been done so far and what is in the pipeline?

Angela Constance: I have mentioned the work that the energy skills action group is doing to liaise with industry on refreshing the skills investment plan. That is an important example of how, in the context of meeting skills shortages, we have been able to promote the gender issue and women's opportunity to participate in careers in energy. Another important development is that the renewables route map will be subject to an equality impact assessment and we will publish and monitor the number of entrants into the renewables sector.

Our engagement with local authorities is about our work with schools. It builds on the new opportunities of contextualised learning for the curriculum for excellence. There are some specific opportunities in and around the senior phase in that it creates the opportunity for more

personalised learning and combines it with the added value of careers services. We also need to promote vocational education, and the modern apprenticeship programme in particular, more consistently.

It is important to emphasise that systemic change involves lots of changes in every part of the process, so we need to start better engagement with young girls before they make subject choices. Then, what we do in the senior phase of the curriculum is important. After that, we need to address how women are supported through STEM subjects and into STEM or oil and gas careers. We all know of the leaky pipeline.

Christian Allard: As the Minister for Youth Employment, do you consider your role to involve work as early as primary school?

Angela Constance: In my role as the Minister for Youth Employment, I am also, in effect, the skills minister, so I have an interest outwith the 16 to 24 age range. It is part of my role to engage with the energy industry, along with Fergus Ewing, on its specific skills needs.

10:15

The Convener: John Finnie has questions on process and then Alex Johnstone has some questions on women's employment in rural areas.

John Finnie: Minister, as the convener said, I have questions about process and the fact that a lot of what we have discussed and many of your answers cut across portfolios. I will list three groups—can you tell me whether they are one and the same? We had a letter from the Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Employment and Sustainable Growth in which he says:

“Specifically in relation to gender, officials are exploring with EBAG”,

which is the equality budget advisory group,

“how to improve the Scottish Government's economic modelling to better reflect the nature of women's employment and women's position in the economy.”

Also, if I noted you correctly—I may not have, not least because of my handwriting—you referred to the cross-directorate occupational segregation group and, of course, you have made a number of mentions of the small group that is taking forward the priorities from the women's employment summit. Are all those groups one and the same? I see an official shaking her head. Is the small group cross-directorate? That seems to be very important.

Angela Constance: I will start from the top. At a broad, strategic, all-Government level we have the strategic group on women and work. I chair it, but the membership is independent. All the members

of the group are women. We have Professor Alice Brown, Professor Sara Carter and Professor Ailsa McKay. We have industry representation in the form of Marjorie Strachan from the Royal Bank of Scotland and Caroline Stuart from Oracle Scotland. The Scottish Trades Union Congress is represented by Ann Henderson and Anne Douglas, and we have Claire Telfer from Save the Children. It is deliberately quite a small group that covers academics, business and the third sector. It oversees the work from the women's employment summit. That independent group will also oversee and inform my reports to Parliament about progress.

John Finnie: Is that the small group?

Angela Constance: It is small, but let me start from the top. That group's overarching purpose is to take forward the many recommendations from the women's employment summit. The summit had six commissions that covered childcare; enterprise; occupational segregation; multiple obstacles and barriers to work; workforce issues; and research and analysis issues. There was also a bit of work on issues in rural areas. It is a massive piece of work. It is a huge jigsaw with many small pieces, so there needs to be somebody at the top level who oversees all that work. We will not do all the work at the nitty-gritty level. Somebody needs to be at the top to oversee the direction of travel.

Underneath that group—I do not mean to be hierarchical about it, but it is just the simplest way to explain—is the cross-directorate group on occupational segregation. It has representation from various portfolios in the Government and it will take forward all the issues in and around occupational segregation, many of which came from the Royal Society of Edinburgh's "Tapping all our Talents" report. Although that report was very focused on STEM issues, the issues that were talked about in relation to STEM apply elsewhere.

We have the strategic group on women and work, and we have the cross-directorate occupational segregation working group, which will do a quite focused but in-depth bit of work on that. There is also the early years task force, which is driving forward the childcare work, so we will link in with the work that it is doing.

When Mr Swinney mentions EBAG, he is talking about a long-standing arrangement—this Government has always had that budget scrutiny through the budget equality impact assessment, which is an important bit of work that feeds into all aspects of Government.

There is the strategic group on women and work; there is the early years task force, which will take forward and feed in work on childcare; and there is the cross-directorate working group on

occupational segregation, which gets into the guts of that issue—I hope that that is clear.

John Finnie: My main interest is in the co-ordination between groups, which you have emphasised. You are talking about massive tasks, and there is no doubt that a lot of good work is going on. In the past, I think that people in different areas had their heads down and did their own thing. It is the pulling together that interests me.

We talked about childcare and education and about how people's minds are shaped at an early stage, and you mentioned the children's minister. You also briefly mentioned the industry minister. It seems to me that he is a key player, too. Can you comment on that?

Angela Constance: That is absolutely the case. Fergus Ewing and I have been engaging the energy sector and the oil and gas sector with regard to skills shortages and how the industry might create more pathways and opportunities for women to enter or return to careers in it. There is very much an all-Government approach—because there has to be.

John Finnie: The UK Government is mounting an unprecedented attack not only on vulnerable people, through welfare reform, but on hard-fought-for workers rights, in the context of the proposals on shares for rights. I understand that one of the high-profile rights that would be traded for shares is the right of access to an employment tribunal, and that another is flexible working. Have you had any involvement on the matter? Would the Scottish Government make representations on it? It seems to me that a lot of the good work that is going on in Scotland could be undermined—albeit for a short period, I hope—by some of the proposals.

Angela Constance: The Scottish Government has been making representations to the UK Government about its move to allow people to give up some of their employment rights in return for shares in the company. Mr Ewing has been the conduit in that regard, and either he or Mr Swinney corresponded with the UK Government on that point.

John Finnie: Is it possible to share that correspondence with the committee?

Angela Constance: It is not my correspondence, but I am sure that, in the interests of openness and transparency, we could share it—let me think about whether there are conventions on sharing letters between ministers. We will check that out.

John Finnie: If it is within the rules—

Angela Constance: I do not want to drive a horse and cart over convention, but we want to be as open as possible about such things. The John

Lewis model of working, in which employees have a share in the company, is productive, but those employees do not benefit from that at the expense of their employment rights. The Scottish Government has definitely communicated with the UK Government on that.

John Finnie: It is an attack on workers' terms and conditions.

Unison has called for a right to flexible working to be enshrined in legislation, to make it more difficult for employers to refuse requests. Does the Scottish Government support such an approach, and would you make representations to the UK Government in that regard?

Angela Constance: As you know, the STUC has regular meetings with the First Minister, at the very top of Government. There will be a meeting in early June, at which a range of labour market issues will be discussed.

As we progress our constitutional work, we will give a party-political view on our framework for employment law.

On the economic case for independence, the paper that was published earlier in the week included suggestions for a more social partnership approach, in which Government would work more collaboratively with the trade union movement and employers at the strategic level, and a national employment rights agency akin to what is available in Ireland.

John Finnie: That is reassuring.

Unison wants the Scottish Government to amend legislation to introduce equal pay audits. Is there support for that?

Angela Constance: My understanding of equal pay audits is that they are about understanding the causes of the pay gap. The UK Government's Equality Act 2010 brought in the need to have "due regard" to tackling discrimination and promoting equality. On the back of that, the Scottish Government in 2012 brought in specific duties for the public sector. As Eileen Flanagan has mentioned, that includes publishing information about the pay gap so that people can evidence that they are mainstreaming equality, and for progress to be reported every few years. The Government has done that recently for its own practices.

We are keen to look at everything in the mix, and we would be happy to discuss proposals of that ilk with all stakeholders, including trade union colleagues and industry, to find out how to go about doing that work. I assume that industry would want to be reassured that such audits would not be overly onerous. However, at the same time, it is important to understand the causes behind what drives the gender pay gap.

Marco Biagi: I have a question about process. Now that Shona Robison has responsibility for most of the work on equalities, where does she fit into the ministerial co-ordination on this topic? I thought that her position was a cross-cutting one on equalities. Are you retaining gender in work as an area of interest?

Angela Constance: I will retain a portfolio responsibility for women and work, while Shona Robison will deal with broader equality issues. I suppose that the equality remit encapsulates women in work.

Marco Biagi: You will report to her then.

Angela Constance: We will both report to the First Minister and our respective cabinet secretaries.

Marco Biagi: In future, would the point of co-ordination of cross-Government action on gender issues be the minister for Commonwealth games, sport and equalities—or whatever the title might be—while you would focus on the work aspect of equality?

Angela Constance: I will have more of a focus on work; Shona Robison will lead on everything that encapsulates equalities. It is important to understand that we have good cross-portfolio working in Government. We must have that in order to reach the best solution. We also have to practise what we preach: we ask the rest of the world to collaborate and work together, so we must show that we can do likewise.

10:30

Alex Johnstone: The minister suggested that one of the officials accompanying her today might have some information on rural issues. We are discussing women and work generally, but are there examples of differences or additional difficulties in a rural environment for women who seek employment?

Angela Constance: Speaking generally, any issue that affects women and work will also have a rural dimension.

Alex Johnstone: There is a need for training for potential new entrants to rural industries, but over recent years and for more than one reason there has been a decline in the availability of specialist training for rural industries; that is particularly true of agriculture and land management courses, which are not as easily obtainable as they once were, but also in tourism, which is becoming a more important industry in Scotland. The fact that there is not the same opportunity for people to train in rural industries has an effect across the board, but does it have a disproportionate effect on women who want to train for work in a rural industry?

Angela Constance: The opportunities that we have include the employability fund, and decisions on how money from that fund is spent are made locally. The fund has replaced the Scottish Government's pre-employment training funding. We brought together the Scottish funding council's and Skills Development Scotland's pre-employability funding. Decisions about how that funding is spent are made at local level so that the funding can respond to local labour markets and skill needs in local communities.

Where tourism is an issue, that should be reflected in the employability spend in that area. Tourism is a key area of economic growth, so there either is or will be a skills investment plan for tourism. We must ensure that the needs of women, whether they are returners or just getting into work, are appropriately reflected in the industry.

Alex Johnstone: Do we deliver education and training for rural industries near enough to the industries? I am concerned about that because we all know that one of the key drivers for the loss of young people from rural communities is that they head off to university and take up careers that cause them never to come back. There is a certain irony in the fact that if someone wants to train in a rural skill or enter a rural industry in their own backyard, they have to leave home to get the training. That means that half the battle is lost before we even get to it.

Angela Constance: The discussions on rural aspects at the women's employment summit with regard to Dumfries and Inverness referred to the issue of depopulation when young people leave for their education. I suppose that that can be balanced by important rural industries creating provision to meet their skill needs. However, training courses require sufficient numbers of people to participate. The work that Mr Russell and Dr Allan do in their portfolios on more flexible learning through the use of information technology provides further opportunities. However, I accept that there will be a need for more hands-on training and experiential learning for agriculture and other rural industries rather than computer-based or classroom learning.

Alex Johnstone: That issue is exactly the same as the one that John Mason pointed out earlier. We have a difficulty in that inappropriate course choices often lead to the loss of courses that we need. With agriculture and rural land-based training, that is exactly what we have suffered from in recent years. My main concern is that we are driving depopulation in some areas and that, as a result of the willingness of women to participate in some rural industries, that depopulation might tend to be disproportionate between the sexes, especially at a younger age.

I move to a slightly different subject that you touched on earlier, to give you the opportunity to say a little more on it, if you think that that is appropriate: the issues of childcare as they affect women in work in rural environments.

Angela Constance: We know that childcare is a massive issue across the country, but the challenges are particularly acute in rural areas; some of those challenges are to do with population mass. There is therefore a need for more individual solutions. There is definitely a need to promote more childminding and out-of-school care. For the more extreme rural areas, there will be issues with access to nursery provision for three and four-year-olds. I ask Susan Bolt to mention some of the specific action points on that stream of work.

Susan Bolt: As the minister mentioned, in rural areas, there is a need for more innovative solutions on childcare, which is why we have put funding in through the third sector fund and the strategic funding partnerships to organisations such as the Care and Learning Alliance. As well as delivering more flexible solutions such as staff banks and different types of flexible childcare, CALA supports other organisations that want to develop and helps with social enterprise models. The funding will help CALA to do nationally what it has done successfully in the Highlands and Moray. We also fund the Scottish Childminding Association, which again provides more flexibility in rural areas and can provide community childminding.

The recent "Commission on the Delivery of Rural Education" report made recommendations in relation to rural areas and learning and childcare. A lot of that is about integrating services and having community hubs so that one out-of-school care service might cover three or four primaries. It is about trying to cluster and integrate services to make them more accessible, viable and sustainable. We will be looking at the recommendations of that report.

Alex Johnstone: Can you say anything about the difficulties relating to extreme sparsity of population? In large areas of Scotland that we describe as rural, the population is relatively dense in rural terms, but other areas, particularly in Perthshire and the Highlands and other places, have very low population densities. Is there a population density beyond which there is little we can do to help with childcare provision?

Angela Constance: I mentioned that the rural dimension runs through every issue and stream of work. We do not want to segregate rural work; we want to embed rural issues into all the work that goes on. There are opportunities with women in enterprise. Supporting the development of social

enterprise seems to be one way of helping to overcome some of the challenges.

Women are underrepresented when it comes to start-ups, self-employment and setting up businesses. It seems to me that in areas that are sparsely populated, reach is an issue as far as services for children are concerned. I do not want to assume that it should always be women who do start-ups in childcare or family service work, even though that might often be the case, but we are trying to get an alignment instead of looking at problems in isolation. We might manage to overcome some of the issues to do with access to childcare and extremely rural areas imaginatively if we get some of the solutions right in promoting women in enterprise.

The Convener: I have a further question on apprenticeships, which play a key role in getting not just young women, but young men into work and training. It therefore follows that apprenticeships could play a key role in breaking down gender segregation, but we know from evidence that we have heard that women make up only 1 per cent of building apprentices and that the take-up by men of apprenticeships in the childcare and caring sector is very low. What is being done to use the apprenticeship scheme to break down gender segregation? What more would you like to see being done through apprenticeships?

Angela Constance: It is important to acknowledge that, overall, there has been a vast improvement in the number of women who participate in the modern apprenticeship programme. Since 2008-09, women's participation has increased from 27 to 43 per cent. In 2008-09, there were 2,857 female modern apprentices, whereas in the most recent year more than 11,000 women participated in the scheme.

Equally, it is important to acknowledge that when we look at different age groups and different frameworks, we see a vast difference between the genders. The two extremes are construction, in which 1.3 per cent of MAs are women, and childcare, in which almost 99 per cent of MAs are women. We are keen to address that, but I do not think that there is a quick solution—I would not like to lead anyone to believe that the issue will be sorted by this time next year.

However, Skills Development Scotland is doing an equality action plan. I am not one for pilotitis, but I think that there is a need for a pilot in this area. I am discussing some ideas with SDS, such as which sector the pilot should be in. It will not necessarily be just for young women. At this stage, I am quite attracted to a pilot that would look at childcare issues. A lot more work needs to be done there.

The success of the modern apprenticeship programme lies in the employed status that goes with it—that is what distinguishes it from other apprenticeship programmes. That is why it leads to sustainable employment. We know that more than 90 per cent of the people who complete an apprenticeship will be in work six months later, and that nearly 80 per cent will be in full-time work. In that sense, we know that the model works, so I would be strongly opposed to playing around with the employed status, but we must find ways to get more women into particular sectors.

The position for women who are older than 25 is more stark. I am interested in how we can get more women into the key areas of economic growth that are part of the Government's economic strategy. We will look at a pilot, and there is an action plan in and around that.

10:45

Poland has had great success in getting more young women into its technical schools. Girls have gone from being 20 or 25 per cent of pupils in technical schools historically to 50 per cent now. Our education systems are different, but I am interested in how Poland has achieved that. When I met the European Union rapporteur on youth employment, who is an MEP for Poland, she said that that had been achieved largely through positive image campaigning. Parents are now banging at the door, wanting to send their girls to vocational school, because that leads to job outcomes. The Polish economy has even starker challenges regarding youth employment than we have.

There is a lot that we can do. We have not hit on the solution yet. The MA programme reflects the workplace and there is a body of work to be done with employers. Wherever I go, whether I visit MAs, training providers or employers, I always ask, "What are you doing to encourage girls?" We need to increase the profile in schools of the MA programme across the piece. There is a desire on my part to address that in a meaningful way that will not lead to the programme having poorer outcomes.

The Convener: Will you update the committee on the equality action plan as it progresses?

Angela Constance: Yes; definitely.

The Convener: It will be very useful for us to be kept up to date on that.

Do committee members have any more questions for the minister?

Christian Allard: I am new to the committee. I had to look in the papers that I received to see what kind of witnesses appear before the committee.

I was concerned about the impact of welfare reform and whether the UK Government had made an assessment of it on young women, women at work and lone parents. Does the Scottish Government have any plans to mitigate that impact?

Angela Constance: The welfare reform agenda is huge and subject to heated debate. Members will be aware of the breadth of work that this Government is doing. For example, we have been able to mitigate cuts to council tax benefit; we worked with local authorities to help more than 0.5 million Scots.

Mr Allard points to the significant issue of lone parents with a child over five being moved from income support to jobseekers allowance, although that will change with universal credit. The situation is very complex.

I think that women should have the choice whether to stay at home to look after their child, or whether to work, which would not take away from anything—I am a working mother, so that shows my preference. As an employment minister, I know that we need to increase women's participation in the labour market, but personally I am always cautious about intervening in decisions for individual parents and families when we do not know their children's needs; for example, some of their children will be disabled. It is a careful balance. Part of our agenda for increasing the participation of women in the labour force—we need to do that for equality and the sake of our economy, because we are really missing a trick—must be to value women who stay at home, work in the home and work to raise their families.

That is my word of caution. We know that £4.5 billion will be taken out of the system between 2011 and 2015 and we know that that will have a more adverse impact on equality groups. I do not want to take advantage of the committee's good humour, but the constitutional arguments play here. I would much rather have powers over welfare than not.

The Convener: There are no further questions, so I thank the minister and witnesses for coming and giving us their evidence.

That concludes the public part of today's meeting. Our next meeting will take place on Thursday 30 May and will include ministerial evidence on the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Bill legislative consent memorandum and consideration of our draft annual report.

10:51

Meeting continued in private until 11:33.

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