



**Cynulliad Cenedlaethol Cymru
The National Assembly for Wales**

**Y Pwyllgor Cyfle Cyfartal
The Committee on Equality of Opportunity**

**Dydd Mawrth, 18 Mai 2010
Tuesday, 18 May 2010**

Cynnwys
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Cofnodir y trafodion hyn yn yr iaith y llefarwyd hwy ynddi yn y pwyllgor. Yn ogystal,
cynhwysir cyfieithiad Saesneg o gyfraniadau yn y Gymraeg.

These proceedings are reported in the language in which they were spoken in the committee.
In addition, an English translation of Welsh speeches is included.

Aelodau'r pwyllgor yn bresennol
Committee members in attendance

Mohammad Asghar	Ceidwadwyr Cymreig Welsh Conservatives
Ann Jones	Llafur (Cadeirydd y Pwyllgor) Labour (Committee Chair)
Janet Ryder	Plaid Cymru The Party of Wales
Joyce Watson	Llafur Labour

Eraill yn bresennol
Others in attendance

Steve Chamberlain	Yr Is-adran Cydraddoldeb, Amrywiaeth a Chynhwysiant, Llywodraeth Cynulliad Cymru Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Division, Welsh Assembly Government
Ashwin Kumar	Cyfarwyddwr Teithwyr Rheilffordd, Passenger Focus Rail Passenger Director, Passenger Focus
Simon Pickering	Rheolwr Cyswllt Teithwyr, Passenger Focus Passenger Link Manager, Passenger Focus
Carl Sargeant	Aelod Cynulliad, Llafur, y Gweinidog dros Gyfiawnder Cymdeithasol a Llywodraeth Leol Assembly Member, Labour, the Minister for Social Justice and Local Government
Ian Skinner	Cyllid Llywodraeth Leol, Llywodraeth Cynulliad Cymru Local Government Finance, Welsh Assembly Government

Swyddogion Cynulliad Cenedlaethol Cymru yn bresennol
National Assembly for Wales officials in attendance

Catherine Hunt	Dirprwy Glerc Deputy Clerk
Claire Morris	Clerc Clerk
Denise Rogers	Gwasanaeth Ymchwil yr Aelodau Members Research Service

Dechreuodd y cyfarfod am 9.32 a.m.
The meeting began at 9.32 a.m.

Cyflwyniad, Ymddiheuriadau a Dirprwyon
Introduction, Apologies and Substitutions

[1] **Ann Jones:** Welcome to the Committee on Equality of Opportunity. Good morning to you, Minister; please join us. We have received an apology for absence from Eleanor Burnham. I will deal with the usual housekeeping issues. We are not expecting a fire alarm test this morning, therefore if the fire alarm does sound, we will take our instructions from the ushers or, as I always say, you can follow me out because I will be one of the first people out of the building, although I think that Carl might beat me to it on this occasion.

[2] I ask everyone to switch off their mobile phones, BlackBerrys and pagers. As usual, the translation facility is available on channel 1, and the amplification of the language used on the floor is available on channel 0.

9.33 a.m.

Y Wybodaeth Diweddaraf am yr Ymgyrch Cyflog Cyfartal Update on the Equal Pay Campaign

[3] **Ann Jones:** It is lovely to have the Minister for Social Justice and Local Government with us. Welcome to you. I think that this is your first appearance before us. We are gentle on the first appearance, but may be harsher on subsequent appearances. No; we are gentle and we are a good committee. I also welcome the officials, Steve Chamberlain and Ian Skinner.

[4] Thank you very much for your paper. We have sets of questions to ask you, therefore, perhaps we could move straight to the questions, unless there is something that you have not included in your paper on which you would like to update us.

[5] **The Minister for Social Justice and Local Government (Carl Sargeant):** I was just going to briefly open up the discussion in terms of where we are and just highlight parts of the paper. That would be helpful, if that would be all right with you.

[6] First, thank you for the kind invitation. I will bear in mind your earlier comments when I receive my second invitation. As you are aware, the Equality Act was introduced by Barbara Castle in 1970. It is very well rehearsed in this committee. I will not be repeating that again today. However, it is suffice to say that, along with members of the committee, I share your frustrations that, despite our best efforts, the completion of job evaluation, which was due in 2007, has not been completed in all authorities. Not all authorities have introduced the new pay arrangements and claims for arrears are still outstanding in some areas. However, we have made some good progress since the issue was raised and discussed last year, I believe, with Brian Gibbons.

[7] In January 2009, eight councils reported that they had yet to complete the job evaluations. Today, only one evaluation is outstanding. Last year, it was reported that capitalisation directions to the tune of £33.6 million had been requested and granted. This year, the figure is around £52 million, which is a significant increase. The gender pay gap has narrowed again to 8.8 per cent, compared to 12.7 per cent the year before. So, I look forward to the day—as I am sure that you do—when I or another Minister can come to this committee and say that the work has been done. However, we have a little way to go before we get there.

[8] One important point to make on moving forward is that the Equality Act 2010 will be significant and useful in ensuring that arrangements are put in place to help public authorities to ensure that their pay arrangements are lawful and not discriminatory. I am sure that you will have many questions when I announce the detail on that.

[9] I appreciate the impact that equal pay has on families, addressing the child poverty agenda and tackling inequality of outcome for people who have traditionally been disadvantaged in our societies. The gap is narrowing and it needs to be eradicated. There is still a lot of work to be done, but we are moving in the right direction—albeit painfully slowly.

[10] **Ann Jones:** Thank you very much for that. I think that we would all blow the whistles or crack open the champagne if we get this all sorted out. How confident are you that all local authorities will complete evaluations of pay and grading and implement fair structures in the current financial year?

[11] **Carl Sargeant:** Last Thursday, I completed my visits of the 22 authorities in Wales. We got to the end of the trail, which was quite a feat in itself. One of the points on the agenda in my discussions with all authorities was equal pay—where they are, whether they would complete it, and the next stages, and so on. That was a part of our dialogue and it will continue to be so until it is finalised. On job evaluations, I am confident that all local authorities will have completed the process by the end of the year.

[12] There has been good progress on implementation. The contacts in local authorities are genuinely committed to moving the process on. However, it would be fair to say that it is a complex process, given the involvement of other parties, the unions and the employees. When there is final agreement, implementation dates sometimes become problematic afterwards. What tends to happen is that it is very complex, you get to a certain stage and then something else pops up that stops or stems the process.

[13] One of the major stumbling blocks that has been brought to my attention is collective agreement. Nationally, the unions are reluctant to use collective bargaining. As there is no collective position, it takes a long time for it to be agreed between employers and individual employees. That is a problem as it is a huge sector. The move away from collective agreements poses its own problems.

[14] **Ann Jones:** Why have some local authorities managed to start the process, negotiate and finish the process so that their employees are now enjoying a fair pay structure, while others have not? Indeed, there is one that is almost being dragged to the starting line while others are on the ceremony rostrum.

[15] **Carl Sargeant:** Again, some of those that seem to be complete are not, because new issues have arisen. It would be unfair to say that all authorities are not moving in the right direction. Part of the problem is that we have 22 authorities that have 22 different ways of doing business. There are problems when you try to bring all of this together. Each authority had different starting points, faced a different set of circumstances, and had a different approach to the single status. Some had less complex pay systems and grading structures than others, and some felt that they would take a cautious approach as opposed to a more proactive approach. However, it is clear that we are moving in the right direction, but they all started at different parts of the process. In fact, some of the more complex ones have achieved it. It is about leadership as well.

9.40 a.m.

[16] **Ann Jones:** Thank you. Janet, do you want to ask your questions now?

[17] **Janet Ryder:** I would like to jump ahead a little, because one of my questions seems to fall naturally here. I would like to pick up on something that you said at the end, Minister. If I heard you correctly, you said that some of the more complex cases have settled earlier than others, and that it comes down to a question of leadership. That opens up a wide question: why do we have authorities with cases that you believe to be simpler to settle still dragging their feet? I will not ask you to pass judgment on leadership in local government, but what scope does the Assembly have to insist on an all-Wales unified approach to implementing fair pay and grading structures?

[18] **Carl Sargeant:** On your first question on leadership, I have told the leaders and the chief executives of the 22 authorities that there is not only the legal process to go through, but that there is a moral obligation around this, in that we should all strive to drive this process towards the right outcome. I did not feel that I was pushing at an open door on all occasions. There was a great sense of nervousness about the legal world that surrounds this. There are

many challenges and legal advice coming from third parties, saying ‘Hang on a sec, there is case law on this’, or, ‘There is a tribunal on this’, and that will affect a decision, because we are talking about large amounts of money here. Therefore, the risk element to local authorities has to be measured. However, my message to them was that, while they need to be considerate in their views, they also need to have an agenda for change in terms of driving this agenda forward. I have noticed that that has changed across the authorities; there is a desire to complete the process. However, I would not like to single out authorities that are perceived to be dragging their heels.

[19] On additional powers, we do not currently hold any powers that would allow a unified approach to implementing equal pay. However, as I mentioned earlier, the Equality Act 2010 will make significant changes to the legal structure, as we and the Equality and Human Rights Commission will have more direction in terms of driving this agenda forward. Therefore, that is an important stepping stone in terms of changing our current position. It is something new, and the Equality Act 2010 will help.

[20] **Janet Ryder:** Do you believe that that will give you the powers to move this along more quickly?

[21] **Carl Sargeant:** It will not give me the powers. However, I believe that I am right in saying that the Equality and Human Rights Commission will have a direction to pursue this.

[22] **Janet Ryder:** Having talked to the 22 authorities, do you believe that a national solution would have been a quicker and better route?

[23] **Carl Sargeant:** My personal opinion is that it would not. Given the complexity of the 22 different ways of doing business, I do not believe that it would be better to bring it into the Assembly, because that is a huge task in itself. That does not mean to say that I would shy away from that work, and that I would not want to pursue it, but I believe that it was too complex. It is much easier for the 22 authorities to work to the end, because they are all at different stages and have different processes. Would I have established 22 different pay models? No. Would I want to sort it out now? No. Would I have started at this point? No. *[Laughter.]*

[24] **Janet Ryder:** So you would not start from here if you had the chance. *[Laughter.]* Finally, on this point, who is taking the lead in each authority? Is it the leader, or is it a nominated officer? Who is driving this in each authority?

[25] **Carl Sargeant:** I think that it varies. There are units in each authority that have dedicated officers driving this agenda forward. However, as I have already said, I believe that it is a question of leadership. I wrote in March, I believe, to all local authority leaders, asking them for a position statement on where they were and what their process was. I am comfortable about sharing the detail with the committee, if that would be helpful.

[26] **Ann Jones:** Yes, that would be helpful. Thank you.

[27] **Carl Sargeant:** However, I am wary of what additional information may be in the letters, and I may just need to tailor that a little. In broad terms, however, I am happy to share each individual response.

[28] **Janet Ryder:** Can you confirm that, even when a unit has been established, or an existing unit is being used, it is accountable and is reporting back to the leader of the county in every case?

[29] **Carl Sargeant:** Yes, that is my understanding.

[30] **Janet Ryder:** Moving on to money, how much in total has been allocated to authorities in unhypothecated revenue support grants to enable them to implement this?

[31] **Carl Sargeant:** Broadly speaking, for the three years between 2005 and 2008, amounts were put into the RSG, year on year; they were £17.5 million, £14.9 million, and £21.6 million respectively. In effect, from 2005 to 2008, around £54 million was built into baselines. Subsequently, this increases annually on the general uplift in the RSG.

[32] **Janet Ryder:** Do you anticipate that to be sufficient?

[33] **Carl Sargeant:** The amount was arrived at following research provided by Local Government Employers in England, and was agreed as part of the 2005-06 settlement process. Do I think that that is enough? The figure was based on research by the Local Government Association, and was accepted at the time in good faith by all. The costs of 2007-08 may well have broadly covered implementation. However, no settlements were made in 2007-08. This has always been a process of trying to get to the end—that is where we want to be. On how we pay the bill, there are other options in terms of capitalisation and so on. Therefore, there is an ‘out’ for all authorities.

[34] **Janet Ryder:** Of the seven local authorities that sought capitalisation, how much will they have to pay back of the liability claims settlement, and how much have they borrowed? What is the size of the capitalisation that they are going to have to pay back?

[35] **Carl Sargeant:** I cannot answer that. However, we have approved £52.3 million of capitalisation from seven of the nine authorities that have reached a settlement on equal pay. The capitalisation direction allows councils to borrow money or to use capital reserves. That can only be used to pay for the revenue costs. However, in terms of each individual authority, and actual figures, I do not have that information.

[36] **Janet Ryder:** Would it be possible to get that information?

[37] **Ann Jones:** I was going to ask the same question.

[38] **Mr Skinner:** I would like to make a point on this issue. You wanted to know, of the £52 million of capitalisation directions, how much local authorities have borrowed.

[39] **Janet Ryder:** I wanted to know what the liability would be to pay it back. What are the financial implications for them as authorities to pay it back? Would that be linked to how much each authority has borrowed?

[40] **Mr Skinner:** Yes. They have borrowed £52 million or they have borrowed part of that, and the rest will be made up of capital resources that they had already put to one side. So, if they use those capital resources, which may have been earmarked for a project, or whatever, they will have to borrow anyway to make up those capital resources. Broadly speaking, £52 million-worth of borrowing has been utilised to pay that liability. That means that they will be paying back the principal and the interest on that borrowing over the next 20 years.

9.50 a.m.

[41] **Janet Ryder:** Would you be able to give us a breakdown, authority by authority, as to what each one—

[42] **Mr Skinner:** We can tell you exactly how much each authority has received. In

effect, they will have all borrowed up to £52 million.

[43] **Carl Sargeant:** If you are looking for details of individual authorities and a breakdown of the £52 million, I am sure that we can give you details on that.

[44] **Mr Skinner:** We are able to say how much each has had, but that figure will not show how much has—

[45] **Ann Jones:** It will not show how much the backpay is.

[46] **Mr Skinner:** It will not show how much has been borrowed and how much they have taken from their capital reserves to pay at that moment in time.

[47] **Carl Sargeant:** So, it is this plus—

[48] **Ann Jones:** Or it could just be this; they might not have put anything in from their own capital. That is what this committee is trying to work out—which authorities have taken it seriously and have put their own savings away, if you like, on top of receiving your assistance, and which authorities have not bothered.

[49] **Carl Sargeant:** It is a fair question, but we also need to look at the background to this—what authorities held in reserves in the first place and so on. It is complicated.

[50] **Ann Jones:** We also need to look at how authorities have spent their additional uplift, and the £54 million that was added into that, which was unhypothecated. Do not get me started on that at this time of the morning, but we need to look at those that have acted wisely and those that have not.

[51] **Carl Sargeant:** I am happy to forward a breakdown of the £54 million.

[52] **Ann Jones:** Thank you. Have you finished your questions, Janet?

[53] **Janet Ryder:** Yes.

[54] **Ann Jones:** Oscar has the next questions.

[55] **Mohammad Asghar:** Following on from Janet's questions, the paper warns that borrowing through the process of capitalisation direction counts towards the public sector borrowing requirement. Can you explain the implications of this for local authorities and the public sector in Wales generally?

[56] **Carl Sargeant:** All authorities are different and have unique circumstances. They are very diverse—I know that from travelling across the 22 authorities. Again, some have much less exposure to equal pay compensation claims, making early settlement more affordable, without the risk of a request for capitalisation direction. I am sorry, is your question primarily about capitalisation?

[57] **Mohammad Asghar:** It is about the implication of capitalisation direction for local authorities and the public sector in Wales generally.

[58] **Carl Sargeant:** Okay. When local authorities borrow, the capitalisation figures are assessed by the Treasury, and the Treasury will bundle this into a complete figure, which is balanced against Wales as a whole. Wales has always managed to be under the figure that is agreed by the Treasury in terms of moving capitalisation forward. However, we are now travelling into the unknown. In the past, we have been able to have some sort of guarantee

about capitalisation, with the ability for authorities to borrow.

[59] We have now changed Governments in the UK, and I am still unsure as to whether capitalisation will be allowed in future borrowing, in terms of changes to Treasury rules and so on. There has never been a guarantee, but we have been able to be more helpful towards local authorities, suggesting that they would be able to achieve capitalisation should they so wish. We are now moving into unknown territory, where capitalisation may be at risk; I do not say that to make a political point—I just do not know. Therefore, capitalisation may not be available in the future, which in effect poses problems for authorities with additionality, in order to assist with financial difficulties that they may face, should they need capitalisation. I hope that that makes sense.

[60] **Mohammad Asghar:** Your paper also states that two authorities have settled backpay liabilities without recourse to a capitalisation direction. How did they manage this?

[61] **Carl Sargeant:** My colleagues may want to respond to that.

[62] **Mr Skinner:** It is simply the particular circumstances of the local authorities. Some have less liability, because of their situation, to do with the construction of jobs, and so on, within the local authority. Some are in a position to call upon greater reserves once they have reached a deal. Therefore, it depends on the circumstances. The capitalisation direction is not just an easy option, however, because it is the last option, and local authorities would rather have a smaller liability and sufficient reserves in order to pay, so that they did not have to borrow, and continue to pay it back over 20 years.

[63] **Mohammad Asghar:** Finally, changing the subject slightly, I have a question on the role of the Assembly Government. I just heard you say, Carl, that you are setting up an agenda for change, which I believe is your party's policy in any case. The WLGA and the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers have warned that, even for the nine authorities that have already settled backpay liability claims, the issue might not be settled if they are subject to second generation claims. Sixteen local authorities have yet to implement a single status agreement. What options are open to the Welsh Government to deal with these ongoing equal pay issues?

[64] **Carl Sargeant:** I am not sure that I said 'agenda for change'.

[65] **Mohammad Asghar:** You said it.

[66] **Carl Sargeant:** I may have said it, but I am not sure that I said it earlier on. *[Laughter.]*

[67] **Ann Jones:** It is selective hearing.

[68] **Carl Sargeant:** Let us understand what I mean. As I have said to public sector authorities in summits and in personal meetings, we have to do business differently in the future. This process has been going on for many years, and I suppose that we are at a tipping point, in that there have been some changes, but not enough, and we are not yet complete. It has probably not helped that there is some political uncertainty around public finances and so on, and there are legal complexities in the system. Therefore, we must change how we do business. We have to move and think differently on how we get to the end of this agenda. As I said earlier, the new Act, which comes into being in 2010, offers some opportunities.

[69] On the second generation claims, I refer to what I said in my opening statement. You get to a point of completion, or what you believe is completion, and then, because of legal advice and tribunals and challenges in courts, another sticking point appears, which, for the

authorities that have not completed, presents another hurdle. Second generation claims are one of these issues, in that a claim may have gone through, and then looking back at some of the cases that have gone down the scale, another claim has gone in on the back of that in terms of equalisation of pay. It is a bizarre set up, and there is no easy answer. However, I have had discussions with the trade unions about how we try to get to an agreed position around the table so that we can process what is morally right and is fiscally much more helpful for everyone. The people who are making a lot of money out of this are the lawyers; the ones providing the legal advice. This will go on forever if it is allowed to, and they are the ones who will make an awful lot of money out of it. Are there any lawyers around the table?

[70] **Ann Jones:** Yes.

[71] **Carl Sargeant:** I do apologise—that may not be true of all lawyers. [*Laughter.*]

[72] **Mohammad Asghar:** As you mentioned, Minister, it is a bizarre set up. What legislative options are open to you, and what legislative options would you consider?

[73] **Carl Sargeant:** As the Minister for Social Justice and Local Government, I do not have powers to compel local authorities to resolve equal pay claims. However, working with your committee, the TUC and the Equality and Human Rights Commission on supporting the promotion of equal pay, I believe that we can drive this agenda forward. The Act, which comes into force later this year, will also help.

10.00 a.m.

[74] **Mohammad Asghar:** Thank you.

[75] **Ann Jones:** Joyce has the next questions.

[76] **Joyce Watson:** Good morning, Minister. My questions are on the same theme. It might help everyone to understand exactly what it has cost to legally defend a council's position, because money that is in the pot is being used for legal advice when it could have been used to settle a pay claim. Some of the councils that have not settled have said that they feel confident that they can defend their position in law, and that they have no case to answer. I know that to be the case; I will not name any authorities, except to say that one of them covers the area I live in and, in a former life, I had that answer from the chief executive. If the information is available—or if you could ask local authorities for an answer—it would be useful to know exactly how much has been spent by councils to defend a legal position, rather than to settle a claim.

[77] **Carl Sargeant:** I do not have details that I can share with you today, Joyce. However, as I said in an earlier response, it is not always the employer or the local authorities that are doing well out of equal pay. As in most circumstances, this is a legal battle that is on a different grounding. It will cost a lot of money. The process is the process. As I said earlier, I have visited the 22 authorities, and I have said clearly that there is a moral obligation to sort this out, and, in general, everyone agrees. The complexity of it is when there is a case in a tribunal or in court concerning employment law where there is a challenge to a part of the process, where everyone else who is involved says, 'Hold on a second. What is the liability to the authority?'. Authorities have an obligation to test this as well, because the cost of resolving this is an unknown quantum. As I said earlier, it is complex, but we have to have that grown-up dialogue to try to move forward. I will try to get you some more detail on costings, Joyce. I do not have them to hand, but I will write to the committee if I have that detail.

[78] **Ann Jones:** May I ask a supplementary question on the back of that? Does it worry

you that some local authorities, when we were first looking at sorting equal pay out—it should have been sorted out some time back—were almost, as Joyce has said, trying to deny the moral obligation on equal pay, and have therefore taken expensive legal advice to uphold that position? Does it worry you that they used council tax money to avoid their moral responsibilities in the early days?

[79] **Carl Sargeant:** I cannot comment on individual authorities, Ann. I am generalising in my response, but I would be disappointed if that was the case. Again, there is evidence, which we saw when we travelled around, of no-win, no-fee lawyers coming into authorities to support employees with legal challenges. Part of the process has moved on from the equal pay agenda to a legal brawl, and that is pretty sad, because it is not the people who should be who are benefiting. I can understand why authorities, and their legal advisers, say, ‘Whoa, let’s slow down here; let’s not go there’, because even the people who have completed are at risk from second generation claims. That leads on to yet another agenda, because the legal test cases that are coming through suggest that that may be the case. Therefore, even when you think that you have done the moral thing, you have moved on the agenda, you have had the great leadership, and you have agreement with the unions and employees, you get to the end and then, all of a sudden, out of the blue, second-generation claims come in. It is a really difficult process. With all the authorities, we are getting to a point this year where we are all on a new baseline. We have made a quite significant leap, really.

[80] **Joyce Watson:** I am glad to hear, Minister, that you have managed to get them to leap into the light and come out of the dark. However, in case any of them do not see the light, there is the Equality Act 2010, which you have referred to a few times this morning. The Equality and Human Rights Commission has produced a paper stating that, under the Act, we could make some very specific duties. One of those duties could be a gender duty. In your opinion, how could the imposition of a specific duty relating to equal pay on local authorities help to tackle the issues that have led to the current unresolved situation regarding equal pay in local authorities?

[81] **Carl Sargeant:** It might be helpful if I briefly take everyone through the process of getting from where we were to where we are now. We conducted a listening exercise between July and November last year, during which we asked stakeholders whether specific public sector equality duties in Wales should include equal pay provisions. The response that we received was positive. I expect policy proposals from my department, including proposals on equal pay, to be published for public consultation later this year. I hope that that will be a positive move, and one that will be welcomed by this committee. I have noted the EHRC’s comments on aspects of specific duties in Wales, and the suggestion that public authorities should undertake reviews to identify whether a gender pay gap exists. If such a gap exists, the review should find out what is contributing to it and how the matter can be addressed in a timely way. In principle, such a requirement would perhaps be appropriate.

[82] It is important that any reporting on pay gaps is not restricted to the publication of statistics. We have to move beyond that. There is a need to have a narrative, and for statistics to be put in context. If a pay gap is evident, outcome-focused objectives will need to be developed. That is something that officials will need to work on before publishing a report to make sure that the issues are resolved. It is not just about producing some figures and then moving on. If we are going to do something, it has to be a package in which we move from the statistics to the end.

[83] A key factor will be developing duties that support better performance of the public sector equality duty. Again, that is something that we will be looking to put out to consultation later this year. What I want to avoid is a situation where a public authority is able to comply with the regulations yet still have discriminatory pay practices in place. The Equality Act 2010 will seek to address not only where we are now, but the development of

pay and pay structures in future. This is so that advice and proper credence can be given to creating a structure that does not develop into a situation of inequality in future.

[84] **Joyce Watson:** Good. I look forward to that day. Thank you very much. Could you tell us what the current situation is regarding equal pay and grading structures, and the settling of any back-pay liability claims in the NHS and other public authorities for which the Welsh Government has some responsibility?

10.10 a.m.

[85] **Carl Sargeant:** The Welsh Assembly Government's Health and Social Services Directorate-General and other departments monitor the level equal pay claims received by NHS bodies from their workforces. The employment tribunal in Newcastle-upon-Tyne dealt with such claims. My understanding is that there are around 350 claims or potential claims outstanding in Wales. In April 2009, the Employment Tribunals Office rejected a key test case on equal pay on all counts. The claim alleged, among other matters, that the national job evaluation study undertaken as part of the Agenda for Change did not satisfy the requirements of the Equal Pay Act 1970, and that there was systematic sex discrimination in the pre-*Agenda for Change* NHS pay system. The period in which an appeal could be presented has now passed and no appeal was lodged. There are a number of other test cases progressing through the tribunal system. In England, they are always looking at advice on what is happening in other parts of England, as well as in Scotland and Wales.

[86] The Department of Health in England is committed to concluding these test cases as soon as possible, thus making the liability position on individual claims clearer, for both NHS staff and their employers. The Welsh Assembly Government is caught up in this legal wrangling of test cases. The number that I have been quoted is that around 350 cases are in tribunal in Wales.

[87] **Joyce Watson:** How are you working with other Ministers to address the issue of equal pay across the public sector in Wales?

[88] **Carl Sargeant:** This is a cross-cutting theme throughout the Welsh Assembly Government. We test the impact of our decisions across all portfolios, whether it is the impact on equality, which is in my portfolio, or education, for example, which is in the Minister for Children, Education and Lifelong Learning's portfolio, and we consider how our policies affect other Ministers' departments. That is a standard process test that we do now. Whatever actions we take, we have to test them against each others' portfolios. That is standard procedure; it is not specific to this issue, but a general procedure. This issue is included as well, and it is important that we do this test.

[89] **Ann Jones:** Are there any further questions? I see that there are not. Thank you, we look forward to receiving the information that you are going to provide. No doubt, we will be returning to this subject. I noticed that you said that we are in uncertain territory at the moment regarding financial claims, but will you give this committee assurances that you will insist that local authorities do all that they can, despite the financial situation, to make sure that they have that moral understanding, as employers, to pay their staff?

[90] **Carl Sargeant:** Thank you, Ann, and the rest of the committee. It has not been as bad as I thought that it was going to be. I will give you my commitment, Ann, that when I came into this post, knowing that this had been on the agenda for quite some time, I wanted to make sure that this was done as, morally, it is the right thing to do. This is something in which I believe personally, as does the Welsh Assembly Government. As I said, I visited all 22 authorities—which was a task in itself—to ensure that this was still on all of their agendas. It still is. I will certainly be pressing my officials to push this agenda forward. I will share with

you the detail that you have asked for. I am more than happy to update you at a later date, Chair, on where we are going, or perhaps I can write to you later in the year, when we may have a clearer understanding of the Equality Act 2010. I will write to you on the details.

[91] **Ann Jones:** Janet, do you have one last point to make?

[92] **Janet Ryder:** Yes. You alluded to the fact that you are expecting an emergency budget to be pushed through in Westminster. That will possibly have quite substantial implications for local government. From past experience, we know that, very often, unfortunately, the things that get affected are issues such as this, or increasing accessibility to services to ensure that they have equality. You have said that you will update the committee, and I wonder whether it will be possible, when we have had that budget, and when you have had time to see what the implications will be for local government and taken soundings from them, to ask the Minister to come back and discuss, not just this issue, but the implications of that budget for equality as it is delivered through local government.

[93] **Carl Sargeant:** I will make two very brief points, if I may, Chair. The important thing is that we have already provided funding through the revenue support grant to try to achieve the Agenda for Change. On your broader question about what the public sector settlement will be for local government in Wales, that is still unclear to me. I do not know whether that will have direct implications for the delivery of the Equality Act and the Equal Pay Act. The reality is that this will be about leaders and councils making a decision regarding their priorities. I would hope that this is a priority—it is certainly one of mine—and I would like to think that local authorities would, morally, settle this for the continuation of the programme.

[94] **Janet Ryder:** I accept what you are saying, Minister—that is everybody's hope—but if you had looked at the things that we have looked at in this committee, you would have seen that it takes much more than this, such as housing adaptations, for example, to create an equal and accessible society. Unfortunately, very often, they are the issues that are costly, and councils are looking to make savings.

[95] **Carl Sargeant:** As an aside, I have already asked my officials to look across the portfolio at the financial implications of a new Government in Westminster.

[96] **Ann Jones:** That is fine.

[97] **Carl Sargeant:** I may be able to drop you a note on my perception of whether a change of programme could put your interests at risk.

[98] **Ann Jones:** That would be good. Thank you, Minister, for coming today, and thank you to Mr Chamberlain and Mr Skinner for being here; we hope to see you back here soon.

[99] **Carl Sargeant:** We are coming back in June.

[100] **Ann Jones:** Yes, you are back on 22 June.

[101] **Carl Sargeant:** Thank you all.

10.17 a.m.

**Ymchwiliad i Hygyrchedd Gorsafoddd Rheilffordd—Tystiolaeth ar Lafar gan
Ffocws ar Deithwyr
Inquiry into the Accessibility of Railway Stations—Oral Evidence from
Passenger Focus**

[102] **Ann Jones:** We now move on to the last item on our agenda, to continue with our inquiry into the accessibility of railway stations in Wales. We are delighted to be receiving evidence from Passenger Focus. We welcome Simon Pickering, who is the passenger link manager, and Ashwin Kumar, who is the rail passenger director. We also thank you for your papers, and for the background reports, which were very interesting. Do you have an opening statement to make, or shall we go straight to questions?

[103] **Mr Pickering:** I have a brief opening statement.

[104] **Ann Jones:** That is fine; a brief opening statement will help us to direct our questions.

[105] **Mr Pickering:** Thank you for the opportunity to present evidence today. Passenger Focus is an independent consumer watchdog for public transport users in Britain, and our aim is to get the best deal for passengers. As has been mentioned, my name is Simon Pickering and I am, essentially, the manager in Wales. With me today is Ashwin Kumar, who is the rail passenger director for our work across Britain, and he is based in London and Manchester. Normally, we would also be joined by Stella Mair Thomas, who is the Assembly-appointed board member for Wales. Unfortunately, she has a long-standing commitment and is unable to join us; however, she endorses the information and views that we will be putting forward today.

[106] Passenger Focus puts a strong emphasis on evidence-based research and campaigning. I think that it is evident in our report that the cornerstone of that is the national passenger survey that we carry out twice each year. In total, it interviews 50,000 passengers each year, around 1,500 to 2,000 of which are based in Wales. From the national passenger survey, we are able to gather a good insight into the satisfaction of passengers with rail services in Wales. We are able to report that overall satisfaction with rail travel in Wales has risen in recent years, with 79 per cent satisfied in 2004, rising to 86 per cent in our last survey in 2009. In addition, during that period, we have seen strong growth in the rail network, particularly in Cardiff and the Valleys, where that growth has often approached 10 per cent per year. The combination of those two facts illustrates the benefits of, and continuing need for, investment in the rail network.

[107] Another instructive lesson from the national passenger survey, and one that is particularly pertinent to this inquiry, is the fact that passenger satisfaction with railway stations in Wales continues to lag behind the average for the rest of Great Britain. That point illustrates the need to not only look for opportunities to expand rail services, but also to invest in infrastructure. There are two other reports that are mentioned in our evidence that I would point out briefly. First is our recent work, which we are repeating again this year, on the assisted passenger reservations service, which provides a very important means of overcoming accessibility difficulties imposed by some of the infrastructure limitations of Victorian-era infrastructure. The second point concerns some of our work on specific routes in Wales, which asked passengers about the key improvements that they would like to see. That illustrates the importance of information for all passengers in order to improve accessibility for all.

10.20 a.m.

[108] Finally, one piece of evidence that we did not put forward in our response, but which is important to emphasise to the committee, and which was, in fact, the top priority for improvement for rail passengers across Wales, is the issue of value for money. That needs to remain at the forefront of industry's and the Government's minds. They need to find a balance between investing in improvements and ensuring that they do not erode the accessibility and affordability of rail travel.

[109] **Ann Jones:** You mentioned the national survey and the fact that that included about 50,000 travellers, 2,000 of which were based in Wales. What proportion of those surveyed are disabled travellers?

[110] **Mr Pickering:** In our most recent survey, which is 'self-stated', around 50 passengers out of 800 were disabled. That sort of number is fairly typical. I would have to do some quick sums to work it out, but I guess that that would equal about 5 to 8 per cent.

[111] **Ann Jones:** Is that a sufficient sample of disabled travellers on which to base evidence? Are the results robust?

[112] **Mr Pickering:** With the national passenger survey, with regard to statistical reliability, we generally do not use the results unless we get in the order of 50 responses. We did receive around that level of responses, which was sufficient for that information to be regarded as robust. If appropriate, we can aggregate successive surveys. That is particularly useful with regard to stations, where things do not tend to change terribly quickly over time. That is less the case with train services, where punctuality or even the frequency of services change over time. That can give more robustness. I think that the results are robust enough, but, admittedly, the number of passengers surveyed is on the edge of that threshold. Perhaps we should exercise a little caution, but I am confident that the results are robust enough.

[113] **Janet Ryder:** You talked about the fact that stations are sometimes slow to change. Given that approximately half of the stations in Wales are affected by a lack of accessible platforms, and that more than 30 stations have platforms that do not allow wheelchair access from the platform to the train and vice versa, how satisfied are you with the pace of improvements in platform facilities in Wales?

[114] **Mr Pickering:** We would like to see those issues being addressed. I guess the good news is that some programmes in the last few years have moved towards doing that. The NSIP programme and the NSIP plus programme in particular are starting to offer the opportunity to address some of these issues. They are quite important, but the pace of change prior to that was slow.

[115] **Janet Ryder:** Could you detail what those programs are, so that we have that on record?

[116] **Mr Pickering:** NSIP is the national stations improvement programme, and that is a pan-Britain programme that has been co-ordinated by Network Rail, I believe.

[117] **Mr Kumar:** Yes, it is co-ordinated by Network Rail.

[118] **Mr Pickering:** In Wales, the Welsh Assembly Government has a booster programme that is allied to that, namely the national stations improvement programme plus. It is a good initiative and is being used to help to lever in European funding to areas that are eligible for it. That relates entirely to programmes for stations. The plus element of that programme has not commenced yet; the application is with the European funders, and I believe that a decision is

imminent as to whether there will be match funding for that element.

[119] **Mr Kumar:** It is worth recognising that, in recent years, the industry has got a little better at identifying lower cost solutions to some of these problems. Some of the initiatives, such as the hump at Aberdovey, are examples of lower cost solutions that can provide practical redress or alleviation of the problem. In our experience, there has been good innovation across the industry in looking for low-cost solutions, but there has not necessarily been a quick enough take-up of those or a quick enough implementation of them all in a more widespread way. We have seen something good piloted in one place, but we would like to see further progress, learn the lessons and get on and do it at far more stations.

[120] **Janet Ryder:** You must be able to see into the future, because I was going to ask for your reaction to the Aberdovey hump and whether you thought it was applicable elsewhere. Are you satisfied that that would be a good solution to many of the problems in Wales, but that it needs to be rolled out more quickly?

[121] **Mr Pickering:** Yes, certainly. The feedback that we have received on that from all users has been very positive. At a recent meeting in the area I asked who uses the Aberdovey hump and was told, 'everyone'. The point about the low platform on some of these stations is that the gap is very significant. At Aberdovey until now they have had to use wooden steps to overcome the low platform height. They have wooden steps and so anyone—able-bodied or otherwise—struggles to get on or off the train. So, everyone goes to the new hump area to get on the train. So, it benefits not only people with mobility issues but those travelling with children or with luggage. I think that I put in our written evidence that golfers use it when travelling between Aberdovey and Harlech.

[122] To return to the question about the pace of change, given time to reflect on that, one point also worth making is that our chief executive has often said that stations are the Cinderellas of the rail industry. Historically, there has been a concentration in the rail industry on targeting investment primarily at rail services. That reflects passengers' priorities, because the first thing that they want to see is that the train is on time, and then they want to be able to get a seat and frequency of service. Those remain the priorities of passengers, but that means that there has been a concentration of investment in that area and, at times, certainly historically, a neglect of stations.

[123] **Janet Ryder:** Can you see a change in that happening?

[124] **Mr Pickering:** As I mentioned, I think that the national stations improvement programme and the national stations improvement programme plus indicate a beginning of a shift towards that. As Ashwin mentioned, for it to be sustained, we probably need to look at low-cost solutions and so on, because cost is one of the barriers. Unfortunately, one big obstacle to this is the fact that station improvement can be very costly.

[125] **Mr Kumar:** It is worth saying that we are much more likely to see progress if we focus on specific areas such as accessibility or the quality of information for passengers rather than saying that we should revamp all of the stations or that every station should have a nice shop and a nice, refurbished platform and so on. The reality is that when you ask passengers about this, they do not put a priority on some of those things, but they do put a priority on accessibility and information.

[126] **Janet Ryder:** Following on from that point on accessibility, one issue that has been highlighted is the lack of disabled parking spaces outside stations, which can contribute to disabled people not using trains. What are the main issues surrounding the provision of car parking for disabled passengers at stations?

[127] **Mr Pickering:** I do not know that we have much evidence specifically about disabled passengers, but parking in general for all rail passengers is certainly an issue and it has been found to suppress demand across the network, so I am sure that that applies to disabled passengers as much as it does to all other passengers. We did some work in the east of England looking at car parking in general. That work found that when passengers were not able to park at the nearest station, they often ended up driving to where they were going and abandoned the intention to take the train. So, I am sure that disabled passengers have a similar experience.

[128] **Janet Ryder:** Would the programmes that you have mentioned on creating greater accessibility not cover this? It would seem to be a cost-effective solution to create some disabled parking spaces outside stations. It is not physically possible to do that at some stations, but if you could create some disabled parking spaces outside the station, would that not be a quick solution to getting more disabled people on the trains?

[129] **Mr Pickering:** Absolutely. There are industry regulations specifying the percentage of car parks that have to be disabled parking spaces. I think that the figure is around 5 per cent or 10 per cent. I also believe that the rail companies are obliged to do some monitoring of the usage of those spaces. So, there are some mechanisms in place, but perhaps they are not being pursued to the extent that they need to be. The solution, certainly, is to try to increase the amount of car parking available to all passengers, and then doubly ensuring that there is adequate provision within that for disabled passengers.

10.30 a.m.

[130] **Janet Ryder:** I want to take you back to the issue that the Chair raised about the percentage of disabled passengers that you questioned during your survey. The survey showed that a greater percentage of disabled passengers were satisfied with the facility than of non-disabled passengers. That does not reflect my postbag in any way, shape or form, so can you give us any reasons for that?

[131] **Mr Pickering:** It is not something that we have explored in depth. The Chair was probing the limits of the statistics, and I recognise that we only survey those who are on the train in the first place. I know that one of the greatest elements of dissatisfaction among disabled rail passengers is access to the service, and if people have not accessed the service, they will not take part in our survey. So, one of the biggest gripes that disabled passengers, quite rightly, have, is something that we are almost by definition not picking up on in the regular survey. Beyond that, disabled passengers were more satisfied overall and also more satisfied with elements of the on-train service. In respect of stations, they were generally more dissatisfied, and they were more dissatisfied with interactions with staff at stations. So, it is a mixed picture. I am afraid that I do not have any more insights into why they might be more satisfied with the on-train experience than passengers overall. Perhaps they have lower expectations; I do not know.

[132] **Mr Kumar:** It is also worth saying that if you take a random sample of passengers you get a fairly small number of disabled passengers. When we do specific bits of research into a particular topic, we generally hold focus groups with disabled passengers so that we can draw out their experiences in respect of that topic, because we might not get a sufficient sample size to get robust findings if we just rely on a random selection of passengers. So, we tend to do that on any particular subject, but we also look at specific issues such as the assisted passenger reservation service.

[133] **Ann Jones:** Do you work with disabled groups then, and not necessarily just disabled travellers? Would you go to a disability forum, for example, and ask how many of them travel on public transport?

[134] **Mr Kumar:** Even if we are holding focus groups with disabled passengers, we try to use market research companies, which use a random selection process, rather than going to disabled groups. We tend to work quite closely with disabled groups on the design of these studies to ensure that we are asking the right questions and that what they think are potential issues are reflected in the questions and studies that are discussed in the focus groups or in the questionnaires.

[135] **Mr Pickering:** We certainly have a dialogue with disability groups. I meet Disability Wales reasonably regularly, as well as some of the other groups, and we keep them abreast of our survey results and the work that we are doing.

[136] **Janet Ryder:** Moving on to facilities at stations, an issue that is raised constantly with me in north Wales—I am sure that it is pertinent to stations throughout Wales—is that facilities such as disabled toilets are often locked. In some stations in north Wales, lifts are not accessible after a certain time of night. Therefore, those stations become inaccessible to disabled travellers and it has quite severe implications for them. What steps can station operators take to address the issue?

[137] **Mr Pickering:** With regard to lifts, most, if not all, lifts now have remote lift operation. We are keen to see that implemented. That means that the control centre, which is staffed 24 hours a day in Cardiff can operate the lift remotely, so that passengers who go to the lift should be able to ring via a telecom interface that they—

[138] **Janet Ryder:** I was thinking more of Wrexham. The issue is with the smaller stations once you get outside of Cardiff. Wrexham is quite a major station, but if you want to use the disabled toilet you have to ask for the key, because it is kept locked. You cannot use the lifts after a certain time of night, and so many passengers end up having to take a taxi back from Chester instead. Those stations are not accessible to disabled people in the evening.

[139] **Mr Pickering:** I was referring to all stations. The facility for remote operation means that a lift at any station that is connected into that system can be operated by the control centre in Cardiff. So, if the station, be it Wrexham or anywhere else, has remote lift operation, the person seeking to use the lift is able via an intercom to make contact with the control centre in Cardiff and that lift will be opened for them. That is my understanding of how the system works.

[140] **Ann Jones:** Have you ever tried to use that remote control?

[141] **Mr Pickering:** No, I have not.

[142] **Ann Jones:** Well, there is a difference between it being linked in and it operating. Once people have been let down, many will not try to use it again and will make other arrangements. I do not know whether Wrexham is in the loop on that, but I know that people have tried to use the remote control facilities. However, that is not your problem.

[143] **Mr Pickering:** I should not be trying to defend a difficult situation for disabled passengers. All that I was seeking to point out is that there are ways and means to address some of these issues, hopefully. We would like to see greater access to toilets in general. As for accessing platforms and so on, ideally, they would be accessible without the need to use staff, as I am sure that people would rather do it independently. So, that also has to be a longer-term priority. Staffing is also a big issue, because a large number of stations are unstaffed or partly staffed in Wales, which causes problems with access for all passengers and for disabled passengers in particular. We are concerned about staffing levels and the pressures across the rail network to reduce staff numbers. It is important to ensure that good staffing

levels are retained at stations so that these difficulties can be overcome.

[144] **Mr Kumar:** You find in research evidence that passengers will say that being able to see that staff are present is a priority for them. All passengers say that, whether for reasons of personal security or for access to facilities in the way that you suggest.

[145] **Joyce Watson:** We have talked mostly about people with a physical disability who require help with movement. I want to move on to people with other disabilities, such as sensory impairment or learning disabilities. You keep saying, quite rightly, that information and the way that it is presented are critical to help anyone in any situation. What do you think is being done well and what needs to be done better to give information to those two categories of people?

[146] **Mr Pickering:** I do not think that there is a great deal of material out there at the moment in Braille and for deafblind people. What is being done well is that most train companies seek to make their websites meet accessibility guidelines, which is a step forward. Most of them have some facility to provide timetables and other information in alternative formats such as large print and Braille on request, but, across the piece, provision is relatively piecemeal at the moment and there is quite a bit of room for more to be done.

10.40 a.m.

[147] **Mr Kumar:** It is worth noting that there are rail vehicle accessibility regulations that require improvements to rail vehicles. I forget whether it is 2018 or 2020, but there is a date by which all trains must meet those regulations. Those regulations include the provision of high-visibility grab poles, high-visibility doors, audible announcements, visual announcements on trains, and information about the station that you are at and the next one. The reason why 2020 was set as the date for implementation of the European regulations by UK Government was because of the cost of making modifications and purchasing new rolling stock. One of the questions will be whether there is any slippage in that, given the financial climate, because when you see vehicles that have been refurbished to those standards, or new vehicles, they are a step change from some of the stock that we have to travel in at the moment. Audible and visible announcements help all passengers, because they reassure people that they are on the right train, as well as helping those who need the announcements as an essential part of their journey. So, there are regulations in place with a date for implementation in respect of rolling stock.

[148] As for stations, I am not aware of any specific regulations. So, for us, a big priority is customer information systems at stations. Again, this is an example where there are low-cost and high-cost solutions. The high-cost solution is a full customer information system at every station, whereas the low-cost solutions use products produced by National Rail Enquiries that can tell you how trains are running. If you have a mobile phone or a PDA you can check any given train and see how it is running at any given point. I do that all the time. You can harness that data and put it onto a fairly cheap screen at every station. This is something that has been piloted by some companies at a few stations, and we would like to see that sort of thing rolled out more consistently. It will take Government intervention, at the end of the day, in setting out regulations for audible announcements at stations, because many unstaffed stations do not have any connections to control centres for routine audible announcements. There is more to do on stations. On rolling stock, we have some regulations in place, but it is a question of timescale, and whether that will slip, given the funding constraints that we foresee.

[149] **Joyce Watson:** Thank you; that was a really good answer. Could you tell us more about the assisted passenger reservation service? You mention it in your paper, and I wonder what you see as its main strengths and weaknesses. You have made a number of recommendations on how it could be improved; could you take us through some of them?

[150] **Mr Pickering:** The APRS system is intended to enable all passengers to physically access the network. Essentially, it means that there is a legal requirement that passengers must be able to travel from their station of choice to their destination of choice. What that may mean, if those stations are inaccessible, is that they are given alternative transport, which is generally a taxi, to or from an accessible station, so that they can join the train. That applies equally at the other end of the journey, although in some instances it means that they are required to travel to a further station, and then change trains and come back—for example, if one platform is inaccessible and the other is accessible, that change of train means that they can alight at an accessible platform.

[151] The scheme is very good in that it provides a legal framework whereby everyone is entitled to physical access to the rail network. As for where it could be improved, fundamentally one of the biggest weaknesses is that it is not well enough known, even among disabled groups. When I speak to focus groups and so on about their experience, I often find that they do not know much about it. So, awareness is one problem. As you have seen from our report, we undertook a mystery shopper exercise on that recently, which highlighted some other problems. We have been working with Arriva and other train operators and have seen improvements in that. There are still further improvements to be gained; assistance sometimes fails or breaks down, so that needs to be tightened up.

[152] The key for us, and perhaps the most fundamental way that we can make this happen, would be the introduction of a computerised system to run APRS for the whole of the GB network, which is something that the industry is beginning to look at. There are two key benefits that would come from that. First, one area that often results in problems at the moment is when you change between train companies. If, for example, you start your journey with Arriva or First Great Western and then travel to England, where other operators are involved, that is where the system too frequently breaks down. So, a computerised system that is accessible to all train companies will start to overcome those limitations. Secondly, it would greatly facilitate the ability to monitor performance and satisfaction, and benchmarks and performance targets could be brought in so that the system could be more rigorously tested and operators measured against their performance.

[153] **Joyce Watson:** Thank you. You go a step further and say that you aspire to a situation where all rail companies have a formal measure of passenger satisfaction, with delivery of APRS being part of their franchise agreement. Can you explain how that might work in practice?

[154] **Mr Pickering:** Absolutely. It follows on from the point that I was making about the computerised system. There is some reluctance on the part of the industry, and indeed in Government, on how well this could be measured currently with the systems that are in place. A better system is needed to measure satisfaction. The way the franchise system works is that train companies have a list of things that they need to meet and against which they are measured. You tend to see the greatest effort and investment targeted at those things they are measured on. So, a specific target for delivery of APRS—which might be a measure of customer satisfaction or of the number of failures, when assistance is not delivered satisfactorily—could be built into the franchise system so that it is a specific part of the contract against which they are measured.

[155] **Joyce Watson:** Good.

[156] **Mohammad Asghar:** You state in your evidence that an objective should be set of ensuring that all stations in Wales have the basic and universal features identified. Have any discussions to this effect taken place with Arriva Trains Wales?

[157] **Mr Pickering:** We certainly highlight this when we meet with Arriva representatives, as well as in the regional transport plans, with the regional consortia and the Welsh Assembly Government. Inevitably, the response from ATW is that it is not funded to undertake station improvements. So, unless a business case can be made—and, inevitably, unfortunately, it will not be made for such features—it will not be able to make those improvements itself. In fairness to ATW, I think that it is supportive of the objective of getting improved information. So, when funding can be provided, it will work towards installation. However, funding is essentially the biggest barrier as far as that is concerned.

[158] **Mohammad Asghar:** Every witness questioned is worried about funding at the moment. In your statement, you call for franchise specification to include more service quality targets. How effective might such targets be in improving accessibility?

[159] **Mr Pickering:** I guess that this goes back to the previous point in that, if you do not measure it, you cannot manage it. With lots of the franchise agreements, we find that they tend to concentrate on a few hard measures, such as punctuality of arrival and so on. We are keen, wherever possible, to have more customer satisfaction measures involved. There are some national passenger survey measures in the current ATW franchise, but, in fairness to ATW, it is meeting all of those reasonably comfortably. We would certainly like to see some stiffer targets being introduced as well, but also targets that look more specifically at aspects of station maintenance and improvement that relate directly to passengers' experience. Some of those could relate to accessibility measures or targets.

10.50 a.m.

[160] **Mohammad Asghar:** How might disabled people play a part in improving the accessibility of railway stations? This could include staff training, raising awareness, access audits of railway stations, and identifying priorities, given the limited availability of funding.

[161] **Mr Pickering:** We are always keen to promote accessibility audits of stations when there are schemes to redevelop stations. It is something that we have been involved in for a few stations—none in Wales, but a couple of key gateway stations for Wales: Chester, Crewe and Birmingham New Street. We have arranged, with the funders of the schemes, for disabled people and disabled groups to be involved in accessibility audits. They take part in an exercise whereby they go around the station and identify things that they find difficult to use. Such exercises can certainly be useful, particularly where the station is to be improved and there is a prospect of change.

[162] Contact between train companies and disabled groups is something that is beneficial to both groups. There are various avenues for that to be explored. I know that Arriva Trains Wales set up a disabled passengers' panel last year, which we support; greater use of that, and allowing disabled passengers to feed into it, will ensure that the voice of disabled passengers can be adequately heard.

[163] **Ann Jones:** Thank you. The paper that you submitted and the evidence that you have presented to this committee is vital to the way in which we progress and the recommendations that we may want to make at the end of this inquiry. Would you like to suggest one recommendation that you think would be achievable and effective? I am sorry, it is like being faced by a blank piece of paper.

[164] **Mr Pickering:** If we were to plump for one, given that we represent all passengers, we would probably plump for moving towards customer information display screens with an audio facility on every station in Wales. We have emphasised the importance of information for all passengers, but it is certainly a key requirement for disabled passengers as much as able-bodied passengers. That would be our No. 1 recommendation.

[165] **Ann Jones:** Thank you. I am sure that the committee has very much more that it wants to put into that. I thank you both for coming today to give evidence. We will send you a copy of the transcript to check for accuracy. When we have completed our report, you will no doubt be the first to have a copy. Thank you both for coming.

[166] The next meeting will be held on 8 June, when we will take evidence from Arriva Trains Wales, Network Rail and the Association of Train Operating Companies. Thank you. The meeting is closed.

Daeth y cyfarfod i ben am 10.53 a.m.
The meeting ended at 10.53 a.m.