

Y Pwyllgor Cyfle Cyfartal

The Committee on Equality of Opportunity

Dydd Mercher, 2 Gorffennaf 2008
Wednesday, 2 July 2008

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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

Eleanor Burnham	Democratiaid Rhyddfrydol Cymru Welsh Liberal Democrats
Mark Isherwood	Ceidwadwyr Cymreig Welsh Conservatives
Bethan Jenkins	Plaid Cymru The Party of Wales
Ann Jones	Llafur (Cadeirydd y Pwyllgor) Labour (Committee Chair)
Joyce Watson	Llafur (yn dirprwyo ar ran Huw Lewis) Labour (substitute for Huw Lewis)

Erail yn bresennol

Others in attendance

Kieran Carr	Deafblind UK
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Ruth Marks MBE	Comisiynydd Pobl Hŷn Cymru Commissioner for Older People in Wales
Shelley McCain	Deafblind UK
Andrew Stallard	Swyddfa Comisiynydd Pobl Hŷn Cymru Office of the Commissioner for Older People in Wales

Swyddogion Gwasanaeth Seneddol y Cynulliad yn bresennol Assembly Parliamentary Service officials in attendance

Claire Griffiths	Dirprwy Clerc Deputy Clerk
Tom Jackson	Clerc Clerk
Helen Roberts	Cynghorydd Cyfreithiol y Pwyllgor Legal Adviser to the Committee

"Dechreuodd y cyfarfod am 9.16 a.m.
The meeting began at 9.16 a.m."

Cyflwyniad, Ymddiheuriadau a Dirprwyon Introduction, Apologies and Substitutions

Ann Jones: Good morning, everyone, and welcome to the Committee on Equality of Opportunity. I ask everyone around the table to switch off their mobile phones, BlackBerrys, pagers and anything else that may affect the broadcasting. The usual housekeeping rules apply. Members can speak in English or Welsh; simultaneous translation is available on channel 1 of the headset, and channel 0 amplifies the sound if you have hearing difficulties. We are not expecting a fire alarm test today, so if we hear the alarm, we should take our instructions from the ushers. I remind you all that we do not have to press the buttons on the microphones, because they are operated by our fantastic sound people, who are hidden away somewhere.

We have had apologies from Huw Lewis, and substituting for him is Joyce Watson, who used to be a member of the committee. We have reduced the committee's size and I place on record my thanks and the committee's thanks to Christine Chapman, Joyce Watson, Nick Ramsay and Chris Franks who are no longer members of this committee. The committee benefited from the wealth of experience of those four members and we look forward to seeing them again as substitutes on occasion. I thank Joyce for filling in for Huw.

9.18 a.m.

Comisiynydd Pobl Hŷn Cymru Commissioner for Older People in Wales

Ann Jones: I welcome Ruth Marks MBE as the Commissioner for Older People in Wales. She is the first such commissioner, so she is trailblazing, as she has done most of her life—she has trailblazed in many other areas. Members of this committee have previously indicated that they would like to undertake an inquiry into issues that affect older people, so our next inquiry could be on those issues.

Could you tell us a little about your work, although you have only just taken up your post? We will then have a dialogue, including questions and comments from Members. We can then look at what we could do in our next inquiry, which we will consider at a future committee meeting. I am sure that you will give us plenty to think about.

I also welcome Andrew Stallard who is sitting next to you. So, Ruth, it is over to you to tell us what the commissioner for older people thinks or will do in the future.

9.20 a.m.

Ms Marks: Thank you, Chair, and good morning to committee members and colleagues. Thank you very much for the opportunity to speak with the Committee on Equality of Opportunity this morning. This is my first appearance as the older people's commissioner before an Assembly committee since my appointment on 21 April, and it is a pleasure to be here. I wish to give you an overview of the role as I see it at the moment, tell you a little about what I have been doing since I took up the post, and also, perhaps more importantly, especially in relation to the discussions that we might have today and in the future, outline how I see the role developing.

As you all know, the Commissioner for Older People (Wales) Act 2006 sets out the framework for my role and appointment. My responsibilities, as determined by the Act, are: to promote awareness of the interests of older people in Wales and of the need to safeguard those interests; to encourage best practice in the treatment of older people in Wales; to keep under review and to scrutinise the adequacy and effectiveness of law affecting the interests of older people in Wales; and to challenge age discrimination. I have legal powers to investigate a number of public bodies in Wales, and I intend to use those powers to provide a just and robust challenge to organisations to do better by older people.

I am currently scoping the extent of my remit, and I am meeting with relevant organisations, including the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales, the Care and Social Services Inspectorate and the Equality and Human Rights Commission so that I can develop effective working relationships with those bodies. It is important that everyone knows exactly what the older people's commissioner is able to do and what my role is. To that end, I plan to provide briefings to Assembly Members over the coming months.

I was really pleased with the announcement of the new single equality Bill last week. Age discrimination was one of the first issues raised with me by campaigning groups, and it was hotly debated at the National Old Age Pensioners Association of Wales annual general meeting in Port Talbot a month ago.

I will now move on to what has happened since I took up post on 21 April. On day one, I entered a temporary office in Cardiff with a small team of colleagues on secondment from a variety of organisations. We had a couple of desks, telephones, no computers, no stationery, no bank account and therefore no funds. Despite that, we were able to send out letters to every Assembly Member, Member of Parliament, Welsh Member of the European Parliament and council leader in Wales to let them know how and where to contact me. Also waiting for me were more than 400 items of correspondence, including invitations to forum meetings and examples of some absolutely terrible situations that older people are faced with in different parts of Wales.

We are now in week 11, and things have moved on fairly rapidly. The most important thing that has happened since I was offered the appointment and taken up post is that older people themselves have determined my priorities, to ensure that I represent what they feel is most appropriate in this office. I wanted to start my series of meetings with older people as soon as possible, and I held my first consultation meeting in Llandudno on 18 June. It was good to see more than 25 people from Anglesey, Gwynedd, Denbighshire and Conwy at that event. It was a great success and it helped me to focus on what is important to older people. My second meeting will be held in Swansea next Monday, and the third meeting is in Mold on Wednesday, 9 July. I will be holding more of these events across Wales, and I have received many invitations, some of them via Assembly Members, for which I am grateful. However, as you will appreciate, as the only member of staff at this time, I have to plan and manage these opportunities carefully to meet people across the country.

The overarching theme and concern from older people has been dignity and respect. Linked to that, very serious and important issues have been raised with me concerning health and social care matters and treatment. I believe that challenging stereotypes will be a key aspect of this work. Transport is also a subject that has been repeated on many occasions and issues of frequency and safety are paramount.

Chair, I have been interested to hear about the night bus service that operates in your constituency, where local people use council buses that are not otherwise used in the evening to pick up and transport people practically from door to door. That is an innovative idea and surely deserves closer investigation. It is ideas like that that I am pleased to find out about so that I can share best practice in communities around Wales, as well as discuss policies at regional and national level.

Through the event held in Llandudno a couple of weeks ago and from the meetings that are coming up in Swansea in Mold, I am pleased to work with older people who have found an active voice in fora or groups of a formal nature. However, I am concerned about those older people who are not actively engaged in fora or group activity. I must develop links with the most vulnerable and frail older people, as well as professionals and all relevant agencies.

At the moment, I have temporary offices, one of which is in Aberystwyth and the other in Cardiff, and I hope that I will soon have a permanent base. I mentioned that I am the only full-time member of staff, but I have recently advertised for a deputy commissioner. Once that appointment has been made, I will take forward a recruitment process that includes staff and colleagues on secondment to continue to develop the commission.

Another way in which I wanted to engage with older people is by launching a competition to design the logo and the strapline to help to develop the image of the commission. I am running this work in partnership with the University of the Third Age, Age Concern Cymru, local groups, and several other organisations, including those with intergenerational links. I am pleased to say that the winner will be announced at the National Eisteddfod of Wales. During the summer months, I will continue to ensure that I listen to older people and convey their concerns, as appropriate.

It might be useful at this point, Chair, for me to give you an idea of how I intend to deal with the issues that are brought to my attention. The important thing is to ensure that I do not duplicate the work that is already being done by organisations such as Age Concern Cymru, Help the Aged in Wales and Citizens Advice. These agencies do a great job in advising older people of their rights and of how to lodge complaints with appropriate bodies. I do not have the capacity to offer advice-line services and I do not think that it would be sensible for the commission to develop in that way, given the funding resources available. What we will always be able to do is answer the telephone in person, respond to written inquiries, and try to point people in the right direction. My role is strategic in nature and will be to ensure that the systems that exist to assist and care for older people take account of their personal situations and always follow the principles of dignity and respect. I also want to reiterate that I will make use of my legal powers should I believe that older and especially vulnerable people are being put at risk.

It is my intention to be just and robust when working with the organisations that are listed in Schedule 2 to the Commissioner for Older People (Wales) Act 2006. I have already been in contact with local authorities and local health boards on an official basis, and I will be seeking to strengthen those links in the coming months. Another element of the Act instructs me to publish an annual report. The first one is due on 1 October and I am pleased that we are to hold a small event here at the Senedd to launch the publication of that document.

While many of the issues that I have been dealing with are of a devolved nature, such as local services and transport issues, many older people have raised issues with me that are reserved by the Westminster Government, such as pensions and benefits. It will be important, therefore, for me to establish appropriate links with Whitehall departments. I was pleased that the Secretary of State for Wales invited me to meet him in the first two weeks of my coming to office. We have established a link officer at the Wales Office who will help us to communicate with the rest of the UK Government. I have also held my first meeting with Gwenda Thomas, Deputy Minister for Social Services, who has responsibility for older people, and Edwina Hart, Minister for Health and Social Services. These links with Government, whether national or local, are important in helping me to convey the key messages that I receive from older people.

9.30 a.m.

I plan to commission research and develop work that I want to present to the Assembly. This could include contributing to any inquiries that this committee might wish to take forward. I have been given a serious undertaking, and I shall, to the best of my ability, and using my independence, be an effective champion of older people in Wales. I intend the commission to play a major role in relation to older people in Wales today, but also to consider the increasing numbers of older people in Wales in the future. I look forward to working with everyone who believes that they can be part of an agenda that challenges age discrimination and promotes positive images of ageing and a culture of dignity and respect. I would be happy to answer any questions or discuss things further.

Ann Jones: Thank you very much for that, Ruth. That was a comprehensive overview, and you have certainly hit the ground running. No-one could accuse you of not having done that. That was very interesting. Do Members have any questions that they want to start off with?

Joyce Watson: Good morning, Ruth. I have two areas that I would like to cover, one of which I gave a talk about, entitled 'Sageism not Ageism: Get wise to work after 50'. From the little research that I did, I found that there is institutional ageism when it comes to employing people aged over 50. The statistic that stood out for me was this: if you are made redundant when you are over the age of 50, you are more likely to die than you are to get another job by the age of 65. That says it all. I am aware that you have legal powers to investigate public bodies, and I am also aware that we must not, at the point of recruiting, ask people their age. However, what are your thoughts about monitoring the situation post recruitment to see whether public bodies are recruiting older people, which is completely different from keeping older people in post? That is my first question.

My second question is this. I came across an article about spending one hour a day in the fresh air, and that is linked to the fact that, if you were a prisoner, you would be allowed at least one hour a day outside in the fresh air. I am not sure whether older people in care settings manage to get outside at all every day. What are the reasons for that? I would be interested in your thoughts on that.

Ann Jones: You may answer each question as it arises, Ruth, but I may start lumping them together if we get stuck for time towards the end.

Ms Marks: I read the work that you researched and presented recently, on the importance of older people's economic contribution in Wales, with great interest, Joyce. I have also had the opportunity to meet with Prime Cymru, one of the Prince's Trust charities, which works to support people who are aged over 50 in looking at self-employment or at getting back into the labour market if they have lost their jobs for whatever reason. We are keen to develop effective working links between the older people's commission and Prime Cymru.

The contribution of older people to society, including their employment and voluntary activity at national or local level, needs to be recognised and acknowledged to a far greater extent than is currently the case. Some of the older people whom I have had a chance to speak to so far have been involved in voluntary activities such as running Scout troops, being involved in the Girlguiding movement, and magistrates, and they have had different experiences of how their long-term contribution has been valued—or not, as the case may be. They feel, rightly, emotional about that.

On economic inactivity and the fact that the numbers of older people in Wales will be increasing, it is important for employers in whichever sector to look at flexible working practices, to enable people of whatever age, whatever life situation they are in, to develop that flexibility. We need to ensure that it is not only when someone hits 50, 55, 60, 65, or 70 and beyond that there is a requirement to stop working full-time for five, five and a half, or six days a week, stopping suddenly on a Friday afternoon. It seems completely daft to me, given my human resource management background. The possibility of building in appropriate succession plans in whatever business someone might be involved with seems to make the most sense. People who have worked in an organisation or a business sector for a long time will have assumed many skills and experiences, many of which will be contained in someone's head, mindset and skills set. The opportunity to share those with other people in the organisation in a planned way and to look at phased retirement stages seems to me to be, ultimately, very sensible.

The point that you made, Joyce, about public bodies and monitoring in relation to recruitment is particularly interesting, given the fact that the Welsh Assembly Government has recently completed a consultation on its own single equality scheme. My input into that consultation made reference to monitoring and age issues. I would certainly like to discuss it with civil servant colleagues if that were deemed appropriate, given the role and the leading edge that the Welsh Assembly Government has sought to develop in relation to equality of opportunity in employment and learning and development.

Moving on to your point about an hour a day in fresh air, those points would be endorsed by professionals working in the health and social care sector. Likewise, I read some recent information regarding the importance of hydration and regularly having water. There was a recent discussion in the Welsh media regarding drinking water rather than tea and coffee—particularly in a care setting. The people who were interviewed said, 'I feel a great deal better because I am drinking more water'. We all know the benefits of doing that. I have links with Care Forum Wales and have met Mario Kreft. I also have links with the National Partnership Forum for Older People in Wales, which is the independent expert advisory body to the Assembly. We will meet with the forum again in July, and I would certainly like to raise that issue to see whether it has undertaken any work on it or whether it would be able to take it any further in its networks across the country. So, I could come back to you on that.

Bethan Jenkins: Thank you very much for your presentation. I appreciate that you probably have a large workload very early on in your career as the older people's commissioner. I have a raft of questions, but my first is on your relationship with the children's commissioner and how you intend to combine efforts, especially with regard to issues at a Westminster level. I noticed that you attended the same event as me last week on welfare reform. What role do you see for yourself with regard to benefits maximisation and that agenda?

My next question relates to fuel poverty. Yesterday, I met fuel poverty campaigners who said that there was £20 million from utility companies that could be utilised to increase winter fuel payment allowances. How do you see that affecting older people in Wales were that to happen?

Another issue, which is a particular issue from my area of Neath Port Talbot, relates to care homes. My colleagues and I have been presented with many cases where older people have had to sell their houses and fund the end of their lives in a care home. That is discrimination. Have you had any cases like that? Could this area be an area of potential inquiry for us? Problems with regard to the rights of older people are prevalent at the moment.

Going back to the children's commissioner, will your reports be passed to bodies such as the United Nations? Will the results of the consultation process that you are currently undertaking go via the Welsh Assembly Government or the National Assembly for Wales, so that we can see what older people are telling us?

9.40 a.m.

Ann Jones: There were quite a few questions there.

Ms Marks: The welfare reform debate was an interesting event, was it not? I will try to link questions 1 and 4 together in my answer in relation to the children's commissioner. I will then deal with the question on the UN and the Assembly, and then I will move on to fuel poverty, followed by the care home issue, if that is okay.

I have met the new children's commissioner on a couple of occasions, and it would be great to note on the Record that new commissioner Keith Towler and all his staff in the Office of the Children's Commissioner for Wales have offered superb support and advice to the older people's commission, as we develop. Indeed, the set-up team of secondees is going to the children's commissioner's office in Swansea tomorrow, so I would like to say a big 'thank you' to the staff there. Therefore, the collaboration has already started between us, and we are seeking to identify elements of work that are appropriate for us to look at together. Your point about benefits in that regard is not one that we have covered so far, Bethan, but we have picked up areas around intergenerational work, and the logo competition is being run in partnership with the children's commissioner, because we thought that that was important.

Several older people who are grandparents have raised a point with me that is a discussion point between both commissioners. It links back to Joyce's point about economic contribution. Anybody who goes to collect children from the school gate can see that the range of people who are involved in childcare includes, obviously, parents, carers and childcare workers, but it also includes a vast number of grandparents, and that links in to the issue of flexibility for grandparents who might still be working. The point that was raised with me was about grandparents who find themselves in a difficult situation when a family breakdown means that they no longer have access to their grandchildren, or their grandchildren are not able to have access to them. I raised that in early-stage discussions with the office of the children's commissioner with regard to any work that we might be able to look at together in the future.

You mentioned the United Nations, and the distinct and important difference between the office of the children's commissioner and the older people's commission at this time is that we do not have a convention on the rights of older people. What we do have is a set of underlying principles, and therefore, if you like, the opportunity to present or report to the UN is not afforded us at the moment. However, I will certainly be interested in learning from the experiences of the office of the children's commissioner and the children's movement and in discussing with people who have been involved in the older people's movement for a long time the benefits of, and the routes to, greater relationships with the UN if they are deemed appropriate. So, the answer to your question is 'absolutely'. The first port of call with regard to any reports or proposals, and certainly with annual reports, will be the National Assembly, and any discussions with any other organisations will follow on from that if deemed appropriate.

The issue of fuel poverty has also been raised with me, personally, face to face and in correspondence to the office. There is great concern, which I think will increase. I have met representatives of utility companies, and I will continue to develop those relationships with relevant umbrella bodies, especially Energywatch as it moves into the new form of the Welsh Consumer Council. Points that seem relevant in relation to encouraging people to take up the allowances and benefits to which they are entitled—this also links in to wider benefits and allowances issues—seem to be about ensuring that people are aware of the social tariff's existence and the hugely beneficial effect that it can have on people's bills and outgoings. The most important issue is that of access to information—I believe that that is what the global phrase would be. That means clear, accessible information that everybody can understand so that everybody knows what they are entitled to and where to go, and that could be in terms of advocating a one-stop shop or advertising one particular freephone number that is answered by a human being, so that you are not waiting in a call system, having to press 99 buttons and so on. That is a gateway to addressing some of the issues of fuel poverty and wider pensioner poverty, which we know is an issue across Wales.

On that final point about care homes, paying for continuing care, and the comments with regard to Neath Port Talbot, it is an incredibly complex system with incredibly in-depth rules and regulations. I have started to look into the challenges that older people and their families are facing in this regard, and I was able to comment on a recent case that the public services ombudsman announced in relation to a local health board in south Wales. I am also taking that further in my discussions with the public services ombudsman and with other relevant agencies, including local authorities and health boards. So, I would say at the moment that it is early days for the older people's commission, but you are right to raise the point, Bethan, because it goes back to access to information: people not knowing or not believing that a system is transparent, fair, and equitable across Wales and believing it to be confusing and complex. It may be that it does not have to be so confusing and complex. That is rising up the agenda.

Eleanor Burnham: There are lots of issues, many of which you have touched on already. "[Inaudible] "fragile commercial situation. The arena that you just touched on is very complex. We in the National Assembly for Wales are almost powerless to help, and I find that frustrating. There are all kinds of issues, including those around appropriate housing, timely moves, downsizing, and so on. What can you do to help in this credit crunch? Many people are having great difficulties. I would be interested to hear your thoughts. I appreciated your introduction; it was very thorough and thoughtful, and I know that you will make your mark on this important issue.

The media often stereotypes us and puts us in silos. I was mentioned in an article the other day, and I noticed that the article mentioned my age; I wondered what that had to do with anything. I am over 50, and it makes you think. We know that everyone wants to know everything about us, including the colour of our underwear. Ageing, and ageism, are issues that you will have interesting times with.

Citizens Advice is under huge pressure and is obviously the first port of call for many of our constituents. What thoughts do you have about that?

Finally, there is a fashion for the draconian monitoring of activity, in terms of bin collections, for instance. That is a serious issue for an ageing population. I wonder whether local authorities in Wales are to follow some in England and fine people if they put the wrong item in the wrong bin, or put the wrong bin out at the wrong time. They may be small issues for some people, but when you are ageing, when taken collectively, such issues are extremely frustrating. I am sure that you have some interesting thoughts on that.

Ms Marks: I note your feelings of powerlessness about financial situations, but I would also say that the work programme of the office of the commissioner for older people will be determined by older people themselves. Finance has been raised as an issue and, going back to Bethan's point about the complexity around continuing health care, it will be interesting to see what ends up on the final list of priorities that the commission takes forward over its first year or so. There could be an issue with the umbrella phrase 'access to information' with regard to finance issues, because people realise that those issues are not devolved to the Welsh Assembly Government, and therefore, as the Commissioner for Older People in Wales, I have no power to scrutinise or challenge in that regard. However, the opportunity to undertake research and to present evidence based on real case studies and real people across the whole country will be very powerful. I will certainly be keen to share that, as appropriate, with Assembly Members and officials to make strong arguments, not only in Wales, but elsewhere in the UK.

9.50 a.m.

Housing is incredibly important. We have received several items of correspondence regarding people's strong feelings about independence. Again, this comes back to dignity and respect and people having a choice about where they live. The majority of people want to remain in their own home and their own environment for as long as they possibly can. Where you live comes back to a fundamental UN principle of human rights. Your safety and security of tenure and the safety, warmth, and familiarity of your own space, wherever that space is and whatever that space comprises, is very important. Again, I have not yet met housing providers and colleagues in the housing division in the Assembly Government, but that area would be interesting to discuss in the future. Our links with Care and Repair Cymru are very strong, and we are recommending and referring people who make inquiries with us directly, if they have not made contact with appropriate agencies such as Care and Repair, and making sure that they have the contact details.

Positive images in the media are a part of the work programme and we are thinking about that as we develop our communications strategy. I hope to have some targeted campaigns, and to run these as a regular feature. Whenever there is a negative stereotype, we will then be able to present a positive image. Of course, the reality check where there are cases of abuse or neglect need to be highlighted, challenged and dealt with, but, if there are positive stories to tell—and I will finish on one in a second when I get back to bins—then it is important to do so.

Citizens Advice Cymru was one of the first voluntary agencies that I met, and it has been incredibly supportive. We are looking at learning from it in relation to our overall management information systems and recording of information and correspondence that might lead to casework and so on. So, we are working closely with it.

In relation to bins and local services, that is absolutely key, especially in cases where wheelie bins are used; these are heavy and difficult to move around, particularly when the weather turns and there is ice on the ground. These are important issues, especially as falls and fractures account for most referrals to hospital. If a fall is a result of moving a wheelie bin on an icy road, then that is not good news. I attended a consultation meeting in Llandudno a few weeks ago. The people at the event were obviously active older people and came from a variety of areas across north Wales. When I shared with them my interest and concern about reaching out to frailer, more vulnerable, older people and asked for their thoughts, the responses came thick and fast. Some of them were suggestions that we might come up with if we discussed it here: through GP surgeries, district nurses, dentists, churches, chapels, community centres, local shops, and so on. This was in some rural environments, but also some urban environments. The question was asked, 'Do you know the people in your street or community who are not getting out and about and who might need some assistance with shopping or with the wheelie bin on that icy day?'. The response was, 'Yes, of course we do.'. So, I think that that community spirit and spirit of goodwill, neighbourliness, and looking out for people in the best sense possible, certainly exists among active older people. That might be another area—reflecting on Bethan's point about the children's commissioner—for intergenerational work, because work was undertaken by the office of the children's commissioner with children and young people, who do not want to be and do not deserve to be demonised and who are stereotyped with different language and negative stereotypes, and they are very pleased to meet with groups of older people, who are also stereotyped—as being 'past it' or 'on the scrapheap', or 'good for nothing' or whatever sorts of inappropriate, negative phrases might be used. The opportunity to look at neighbourhoods working together effectively in that way would be incredibly positive, and would be a good news story.

Ann Jones: Claire has just reminded me that the Social Justice and Regeneration Committee in the previous Assembly produced a report on housing needs for older people. Claire will therefore arrange to send you a copy of that electronically, which might help you with this issue. Mark has the next questions.

Mark Isherwood: You mentioned discussing matters with civil service colleagues, if appropriate; I do not believe that there is any 'if' about it—it is appropriate. Care homes have been mentioned. In addition to the human rights aspects and the issue of how care homes are funded, there is the issue of assessment of need. I do some work with the Alzheimer's Society in north Wales. I attend meetings where people with Alzheimer's and their carers are present, so that their views are heard and are represented. While everyone would, ideally, like to live in their own homes for the whole of their lives, circumstances may arise—if a carer dies first, or if the person with Alzheimer's reaches a later stage in their condition—in which people need respite care, and possibly residential care, and there is a concern that we are not planning for that growing need in the future. What comments do you have on the need to assess that alongside the care in the community agenda, rather than acting as if one would entirely replace the other?

You talked about links with Whitehall departments, which is encouraging. We all get approached on matters, particularly benefit-related matters, which are not devolved. Are you working with bodies that represent older people across the border, in terms of joined-up lobbying? You can be a voice for Wales, but working with others with the same agenda could add to the power of the message. What role do you see the over-50s fora, or the older people's fora, having in general, not at an advisory level, but at a strategic level? Some local authorities are bringing in their own older people's advisory panels, and some of the fora feel that they are being relegated, to the extent of even being excluded from conferences and meetings—I have written to you about one case—but, ironically, they are being invited to equivalent conferences in other parts of Wales, where they have a key role to play. What discussions do you propose to have, perhaps with the NHS? I get a lot of case work relating to dignity and the respect due to older people who spend time in bed in hospital.

On elder abuse, I accept that it is early days for you to hit all the buttons at once, but to what extent is this on the radar? Again, I have had several approaches about this. Fuel poverty has been mentioned. Last month, I chaired a National Assembly Sustainable Energy Group meeting, at which one of the major utility companies gave a presentation on how it wished to contribute, and could contribute, to the agreement on £150 million for fuel poverty measures with the UK Government. It was looking for guidance and advice; it said that it could spend the money easily, but wondered whether the money would be spent in the most effective way. In your discussions with utility companies, will you be able to highlight ways in which old people themselves could best access and benefit from this? I suspect that they would welcome that input.

On joined-up working, again, I have had several cases where the left arm does not know what the right arm is doing. Therefore, you get a situation, for instance, of an extra care development involving the demolition of a building that provides low-cost office accommodation for the local disability fora, age-related charities, or disability groups, where the authority is not planning to sustain their services, even though it is reliant on those services in other contexts.

10.00 a.m.

Another similar example is where council tax departments pursue people in arrears without talking to the housing department, which could have a key support role and which would have to take on the person if the case led to eviction. There was a recent case where a bailiff came round at the weekend: there was no office open, so the person could not speak to the citizens' advice bureau or to officers in the council; all that they could do was to contact someone like me. That person under duress, two days later, went to a loan shark. That is just an example.

Citizens Advice was mentioned, and there is concern that proposals by the Legal Services Commission for eight commissioning areas in Wales could lead to a loss of provision in relation to the added value services. Do you feel that you could have a voice on that agenda?

Finally, you mentioned good examples of cross-generational work in communities. There are some good examples, but there are also many bad examples. I, among others, will be happy to share some of those with you.

Ann Jones: There is a shopping list there for you.

Ms Marks: Are we okay for time, Chair?

Ann Jones: Yes, we will accommodate.

Ms Marks: I take your point about appropriate communication, Mark. On the issues in relation to care homes and to the Alzheimer's Society, the provision of dementia care beds in Wales and the specialist care that is required, not only for the individuals affected, but for their families and carers at certain stages are on my radar. Last night, I had the opportunity to attend a small function here held by the Parkinson's Disease Society in relation to the important role of specialist nurses for Parkinson's disease. What struck me when one of the specialist nurses spoke was her links not only with individual patients, but with their families and carers in relation to support. Ultimately, what is important, going back to Eleanor's point about independence and housing, is a mixed economy of care. It is important that individuals and their families and carers have choice, and information about that choice, and support, as appropriate, at different stages in their lives, and it is important to appreciate the traumatic impact that an inappropriate move at the wrong time can have on an individual.

You asked about my relationships with organisations across the UK in relation to influencing change. My meetings with Age Concern and Help the Aged, within the first 10 days of taking up post, included references to the Equality Bill and the importance of age discrimination being included in that Bill, and I was pleased to be able to mention that in my first meeting with the Secretary of State for Wales when I met him in early May. I have also had the chance to meet the Minister of State for Pensions Reform, Mike O'Brien, when he visited the pension centre in Swansea and was able to raise issues regarding the challenges that are faced by older people, not only in Wales, but also across the UK. So, I will look to maintain and develop those communications as I go forward.

On the over-50s fora and their strategic role, and so on, I am aware of some of the examples that you are taking about and others. When you go back to first principles with the strategy for older people in Wales, that document and that overall mission and vision is around putting citizens at the heart of policy and decision making, and that includes citizens of all ages. So the importance of taking into account people's views, particularly people who are active and want to get involved in that type of civic society activity, is important and one that I will be keen to discuss with the strategy co-ordinators and also with the older people's champions in local authorities.

Dignity and respect in health and social care is vital and it is concerning that the British Geriatric Society believes that there is institutionalised ageism in health and social care settings, as well as many good examples of good practice. I am therefore keen to meet Dr Win Tadd, who is the chair of the dignity and care co-ordinating group campaign established by the Welsh Assembly Government, and to also work with other groups in a variety of different settings, across the public, private and voluntary sectors, which are promoting dignity and respect in care settings.

That includes elder abuse and raising awareness. Talking about elder abuse is important, recognising that it does not only exist in care settings, but also in homes and communities. On elder abuse, we can learn a great deal, in terms of communication, from domestic violence and domestic abuse organisations. I have spoken at an elder abuse seminar organised by Age Concern Cymru and the protection of vulnerable adults co-ordinators in Wales and will be maintaining contact with those networks.

On fuel poverty, I do not have a detailed answer for the point that you raised on your discussions with colleagues in that setting. However, referring back to the point on access to information, I think that it is incredibly important to ensure that people are aware of what they can claim and what they are entitled to.

My quick response on joined-up working would be that it just re-emphasises the point that you made earlier about the over-50s fora and other strategic groups and how important it is for older people to be involved in decisions that influence policies and services that affect their lives. Ultimately, issues relating to ageing, active ageing and older people in society should be seen as part of a mainstream equality and diversity area of work.

When I met with Citizens Advice Cymru, Fran Targett raised the challenges in relation to the Legal Services Commission. Fran and I are continuing to talk regularly. If I can do anything appropriate on that, I will do it.

Ann Jones: Thank you, Ruth. As you were talking, I realised that I have many ideas as to what we could do, but I was taken by your point on good neighbours and good communities. If we could move forward on that, it would assist us. It is incumbent on all of us to know who is living next door or who is across the road and, if the weather is bad, we should knock on that person's door. Unfortunately that does not happen, for many reasons. I am sure that there is enough there for us to think about in terms of our next committee inquiry. I am sure that you will be a regular visitor to the committee and I thank you for coming along. I will ask Members to think about a topic to include in our forward work programme over the next few weeks. We will certainly contact you for advice and assistance on that report. Thank you to both of you for coming here and for answering our questions today. We look forward to working with you in the future.

So, if Members could think about our next inquiry, we could include your ideas in our discussions on our forward work programme, which will be on 16 July. E-mail any suggestions that you think that we could consider to Claire or Tom. Bethan has made one suggestion and I have an idea that we should look at carers' allowance and the fact that it stops at the age of 60, but carers do not necessarily stop caring at 60, do they?

Bethan Jenkins: Does it have to be a broad issue, or can it be as small or as large as we would like it to be?

Ann Jones: I think that it can be as small or as large as we wish. If you have any ideas, put them in an e-mail and we can discuss them along with the forward work programme on 16 July, which is our last meeting before the end of term. We could set that in motion over the recess, calling for written evidence if necessary.

Before we welcome our next witnesses, I refer you to the paper to note on the access to information document. The equalities team at the Assembly Commission is working on the accessible information policy. We have the latest draft, so if Members have any comments on the policy, could they send them to the secretariat who can forward them? It is anticipated that that will be finished in the autumn term. The equalities team will then come to committee to discuss the policy with Members. So, if you have any views on that document, you should let the secretariat know.

10.10 a.m.

Dogfennau sydd wedi'u Cyhoeddi ar gyfer Pobl â Nam ar eu Golwg **Published Documents for Visually Impaired People**

Ann Jones: It is my pleasure to welcome Kieran Carr and Shelly McCain from Deafblind UK. Thank you for taking the time to discuss your paper with us. This is a short inquiry; it was started when the chief executive of Deafblind Cymru, Jeff Skipp, wrote to me as Chair wanting to explore the possibilities of further developing the services that Deafblind Cymru can operate for deafblind people in Wales. When we wrote back to say that we would look at it, we also asked whether you could look at the National Assembly for Wales's website and give your views on that. Political parties are probably the worst at designing leaflets, and we probably break every rule in terms of size of font and the type of paper that we use. So, we probably have a lot to learn in terms of how we communicate that message, but I am sure that you will tell us more about that. Can you briefly give an overview of the issues—we have read your paper—and then we will go to Members' questions? We are here to glean information from you, so we will not grill you or turn the spotlight on you. We want your expertise and advice on what we can do to assist in ensuring that everyone is able to take the information that we want to put out.

Mr Carr: Thank you for inviting us. Jeff sends his apologies, because the invitation was originally for him. He is hopefully jetting off to Florida, subject to his daughter getting over chicken pox in time, so it is a bit tense for him. I will quickly give a brief overview of the paper, before the discussion opens up.

As an organisation, we find that sighted people take access to information for granted, and the way that information is provided across the country is very much in an environment for people who are sighted. Improvements have happened over the last few years with legislation through the Disability Discrimination Act 2005 and other guidance through the Department of Health. However, the size of the problem is still considerable. The Royal National Institute of Blind People estimates that there are 2 million blind or partially sighted people in the UK, and in Wales alone, 20,000 people are registered as such; that will not include everyone who suffers from some form of partial sight.

Blind and partially sighted people do not have a common solution, and that is one of the problems that many organisations and public bodies have. What we often see is a one-size-fits-all approach, and that one size can be the solution to everyone's access needs. An example of that would be the provision of documentation in what is considered to be large print—font size 14. For many people, that is not an appropriate standard of format, and it does not work for many people.

The main issue, and something that Deafblind UK looks to overcome, is that organisations must identify what their communication needs are for information. As an organisation, we provide information in 14 different formats for our 3,500 members. The way that we have gone about this is by asking our service users about the formats that they require and then identifying a way of meeting that. It is also about more than just providing alternative formats—it is also about making available aids and adaptations for people who have residual sight and are unable to use things such as magnifiers and closed circuit television. There is a lack of that type of equipment available in public buildings. A number of libraries that I have visited would not be able to provide that type of equipment on request.

The other issue, in talking about website accessibility, is that the DDA has improved the accessibility of websites and more and more organisations are looking to comply with the World Wide Web Consortium guidelines, which the National Assembly website does, to a point. Some specific things that we identified with the Assembly website were that the accessibility option itself is very much an add-on. It is not at the forefront of the website; it is at the bottom of the homepage and is not part of the navigation bar. It certainly needs to be more visible.

Also, the information provided through the accessibility website on how to adjust someone's browser covers one or two browser options, but it needs to cover far more. It talks about the common browser options, which are Microsoft, Microsoft for Apple and Netscape, but there are far more browsers than that on the market, and people are using them. One thing that it does not do is provide an option for plain layout or advice on plain layout. For many blind and partially sighted people, one of the main problems is the amount of graphics that are used on websites, which many people just cannot relate to and they do not provide a lot of information. A plain layout should be available that can then be put into a browser and adapted to meet the individual's needs. There is no recognition that maybe an audio format should be available for the website as well, which is something that more and more websites are making available.

In terms of publications and providing accessible websites, one of the areas of work that we are looking at more and more closely is how we support deafblind people in accessing information through human support. This is something that we are actively looking to promote in Wales. We have just been successful in securing a national lottery bid for something called the Welsh Connections project, which will be aiming to set up, over the next three years, 12 peer support groups for deafblind people across Wales. We see those groups fulfilling a number of functions: they will be self-help groups, run by the members, so we see them very much as an enabling function; we see them facilitating the breakdown of isolation, particularly for our client group of deafblind people; and, we also see them as a forum for communicating information. We have looked at other groups in other parts of the country where we have worked and certain specific information that they cannot access easily is vital to elderly people and people with sight and hearing loss. A good example of that is information on things like fuel poverty. We can communicate Government policy and support and bring in local energy suppliers to provide information that is accessible to people, which can be relayed through human support as well as through publications.

I would recommend that all organisations put in place an accessible information policy. Quite simply, that policy should identify the need in terms of that communication, how it is going to be delivered and, more importantly, who is responsible for ensuring that it happens. Finally, the DDA has gone a long way in improving things across the UK, but I think that there needs to be a reinforcement of the section 7 guidance in relation to deafblind people that was part of the Local Authority Social Services Act 1970. Originally, it was a legislative requirement, but it is now just guidance. While that guidance embraces a number of issues, it does cover the accessibility of information and best practice on how information is made available. What we have found in recent research is that that really is not happening.

10.20 a.m.

We carried out a survey of our members on something as simple as receiving appointment cards from their GPs. We found that 58 per cent of people were not receiving them in an accessible format, which had an impact on the number of appointments being missed.

Ann Jones: That is great. I was just thinking about that last point. Thanks very much.

The National Assembly's website clearly has a lot to alter, based on the points that you made. Part of this discussion is about finding ways to become better at disseminating our own information, so that we can then go to others and say, 'You have to do it, too'. It is interesting to know that we need to pick those points up.

You said that there are 14 different types of format that you send out just for your members. I suppose that the most common ones are the large-print plain layout, the audio and Braille formats. You talked about another, more tactile format. Was it 'tactile'? I just cannot find it in your paper. Could you tell me what it is?

Mr Carr: Yes. It is Moon, which is a tactile font. It is no longer widely used, but 20 to 30 people in our membership still use it. People who experience loss of vision later in life can find reading Braille a difficult skill to master, and so Moon is a simpler format, being more representative of letters. People who have had some sight in the past have a more visual memory of letters, and Moon is simpler for them. It is not used as widely as it used to be, however. Services such as the RNIB's Braille book service are reducing their Moon provision considerably. However, if people still use it, we provide for it.

Ann Jones: I was interested when I read about it in the paper. I could not find it quickly enough when you finished, which is why I asked you to explain it to me. That is interesting. Do Members have any questions?

Eleanor Burnham: What are the other formats? I am absolutely intrigued by, though rather ignorant of, the other 11 or 12 formats that you referred to. If you do not have time to tell us now, perhaps you could send us a list with an explanation of how they are used. I am not even aware of them, and I am sure that the same would be found if you asked most people. That leads me to my other question about raising awareness. Is this due to cost or is it just a lack of awareness by public bodies in particular—and you were talking about the NHS? It is really horrifying to think that a doctor or someone who has an intimate knowledge of your needs is not sending out the appropriate appointment forms. How on earth can anybody access them? Should these people not know what is needed? How is raising awareness done, particularly in the health and public services, and is there a cost implication?

Mr Carr: We have costings for producing our own formats. I will not go through all 14 of them; we can provide that information. It is an expensive process, but the simple thing is that we ask what format people require. Interestingly, that is one point that I did not mention about your website: at no point anywhere do you ask for feedback on how accessible it is. Until people are asked what they need, you will never be in a position to provide it. That is coming across from most public bodies.

We have the costs of providing alternative formats, but they are not to hand. However, the process is a costly one, particularly for Braille. Braille paper is particularly expensive.

Eleanor Burnham: If one is accessing the health service, you would expect it to be aware enough to allow you to have the information in the appropriate form.

Mr Carr: Yes, I agree that it should be available. What happens is that people are asked about alternative formats, but the timeframe required to source them goes beyond the time of the appointment or the point at which the information is required. Therefore, the appointment often takes place without the information in the alternative format being made available. If organisations had an accessible information policy, they would have clear guidelines on how to provide alternative information, they would understand what they needed to provide, having asked their customers, and they would also know how to source alternative formats and where they could get that work done quickly.

Joyce Watson: Good morning. I read your information with interest and thank you for coming. The first port of call for any person wanting to access a service, whatever that may be and whatever their needs may be, is front-line staff. I believe that they will play a major part in this. If they do not understand that people have a difficulty, they will not necessarily understand the need. I would be particularly interested in that element, especially in light of our ageing population, and those numbers will not go down; they can only grow. What do you think we should advise people to do? I know that you have given advice, but how do you think that we could help with that element?

Mr Carr: On health and social care provision, for our client group—and I am specifically talking about deafblind people who face an additional problem—the application of the section 7 guidance would go a long way towards providing the correct levels of accessibility to services. Part of the guidance advises bodies that they should have staff who are trained specifically in deafblind awareness and who have an understanding of the issues that deafblind people face in accessing information. What we often find in our work is that that expertise has become diluted over time. In social services, it is either picked up by the elderly people's provision or by someone who has been appointed from a sensory team who may have knowledge of one form of sensory loss but not of others. In addition, another key aspect of the guidance is that of being aware and of keeping a register of the deafblind people who live in an authority area, so that we can know the size of the problem. In our work, we find that some authorities do that and do it very well, but a large number does not and is dealing with issues only as and when they are presented. So, they could not put together something like an accessible information policy, because they are dealing with issues on an ad hoc basis.

Ann Jones: You mentioned section 7 guidance. I am probably showing my ignorance here, as I ought to know, but could you provide us with a copy of that or give us the link to it? That could be done outside committee. If I should know where it is, I apologise, but it would be handy for us to have that, to make sure that we can become an exemplar as well. Bethan is next.

Bethan Jenkins: This will be a very short contribution. Thank you for coming. Did you have any discussions with the Assembly Commission prior to the development of the new website on its accessibility? A new group is to be set up in the Assembly, involving interested parties and Assembly Members, on the development of IT. It will of course be looking at new technologies, but the website should be accessible. I suggest taking this to the commission, to suggest that you be part of that group. There is no point in our developing new ideas and looking forward to new technologies if a large percentage of the population cannot participate. That is highlighted with the new concept for the Petitions Committee, with you being able to access us and vice versa.

10.30 a.m.

My other question follows on from your repeated references to accessible information policies. Could you expand on that briefly? How many local authorities have them? What are they doing to put them in place? How could we use our resources or influence to ensure that they are put in place and that authorities comply with what you perceive to be necessary for development in this area?

Mr Carr: To be perfectly honest, I do not know how many authorities or public bodies have accessible information policies.

Bethan Jenkins: So, you are not carrying out any research on that.

Mr Carr: We are not carrying out any research. I know that the RNIB is a strong advocate of accessible information policies, and so it may have done work on identifying public bodies.

Ann Jones: We will write and ask the Minister how many local authorities in Wales have an accessible information policy and what they contain. That will then become public information, which you will be able to share.

Eleanor Burnham: May I—

Ann Jones: Sorry, Eleanor, I will let you come in later, but we have not finished dealing with Bethan's questions, have we?

Bethan Jenkins: No, I have not had an answer on the first part with regard to the website.

Mr Carr: Was that the question as to whether we would be happy to—

Bethan Jenkins: Have you been involved, and would you want to be involved?

Mr Carr: No, we have not been involved.

Eleanor Burnham: This is an extension of your observation, Chair. The NHS is a public body, so should we not inquire of the Minister for health about accessibility? It is disturbing to find that a doctor, a GP, who is supposed to be caring for a patient, has not sent out the appropriate form.

Ann Jones: We will add the Minister for health and ask about health bodies as well as local authorities.

Mr Carr: There are other aspects and practical changes that we have been lobbying for through our health report. For example, a standard length of appointment is not enough for a deafblind person, so we are asking for simple things like being able to book extended appointments. It is amazing how many general practices do not make that service available. In addition, there is a shortage of British Sign Language signers in the country, which is recognised, but we want to be able to identify human support so that people can attend doctors' appointments with a signer, and we want to make that service more readily available.

Ann Jones: We have trained 30 more BSL signers through the BSL Futures task and finish group, and we hope that they will go on and have a cascading effect. We realise that it is not enough, but it is a start and, hopefully, there are 30 more people out there who can offer support. It is not a lot; it is just over 1 person per authority, if you look at it from that angle, but at least we have recognised that need. However, as you said, we need to recognise other things. We will get the information first, and perhaps we can look at it afterwards.

Mark Isherwood: You referred to the need for training in deafblind awareness, and the NHS was mentioned. I am aware of several different disability groups and other equality groups that are emphasising the need for equality awareness training. Given the logistics, and that local authorities argue that it is a huge task to attempt to train everyone, do you think that there should be entry-level awareness training? Once you unlock awareness of the general issues in people's minds, they can focus better on the specifics, particularly in relation to their professional duties or responsibilities, such as in relation to the types of customers they have if they are customer-facing staff. How do you think that that should be done? Who should provide the training? How should it be tiered, and at what level should it be set to ensure that that understanding reaches the people that it needs to reach throughout—in this case—the public sector?

In terms of the private sector—because a lot of essential services, such as banking or leisure services, may be accessed through the private sector directly or indirectly—you mentioned 14 different communication mechanisms that you use, but what would be reasonable for a private sector service provider to provide and how should that be monitored? Would your members have the facility to mystery shop, for example, and feed back in? What feelings do you have on that?

Mr Carr: I will answer the training question first. We are a provider of deafblind awareness training, and we deliver it at two different levels. We deliver an initial awareness course, which covers things like etiquette and methods of communication and offers simple guiding techniques. We deliver that course to a number of local authorities, which commission us to do that. We then deliver a level 2 qualification, which is an accredited course through the CCDP. We train people to understand and to be able to use communication techniques to a level 2 standard. Again, we provide that training to local authorities. We have a fairly limited resource to provide that training. At the moment, the demand does not exceed what we can supply. The main reason for that is the cost to local authorities of releasing people. The level 2 course lasts for five days. We have considered how we can deliver that in different ways for different authorities in terms of shortening the length of the training programme. We work with other sensory organisations, through CCDP, such as the Royal National Institute of Blind People, Sense, the Royal National Institute for Deaf People, and we pool training resources. The biggest barrier to delivering that level of training is that the cost to local authorities in terms of staff time.

Ms McCain: Sometimes, raising awareness is just the starting point in looking at the assumptions that people have about deafblind people. It is about looking at the assumptions that they already have carers and families who look after them and that they are already well supported. That is not necessarily true. Many people are always on their own. Even breaking down assumptions and teaching about the difficulties that people with deafblindness face, which can be done easily through a leaflet or in video format, could be an excellent starting point to get people to think about the difficulties that people can face.

Mr Carr: With regard to commercial organisations, banks are a good example. My bank—I will not say which it is—provides its publications in two alternative formats: a large print version and a Braille version. The issue with a commercial organisation is the speed at which it can deliver the format. Organisations have to be careful not to make a promise that they cannot deliver or which they cannot deliver on time. That is a consideration. One simple thing that banks could do is make equipment that people can use to read documentation available in bank lobbies, for example, simple things like magnifiers and closed-circuit televisions. Such equipment is not particularly expensive, but they make it much easier for people to access and use the bank's service. More and more banks are providing signature cards. It is difficult to determine the point at which they think that it is a commercial requirement. As potential customers, deafblind people have a lot of money to spend and, if you are missing out on that, you are missing a business opportunity. That is the approach that we take.

10.40 a.m.

The main accessibility focus has been on buildings and the physical environment, and I think that that is still the case.

Eleanor Burnham: You have not really mentioned how many members you have. I presume that membership would cover most people who fall into this unfortunate category.

Mr Carr: We have 3,500 members. The Department of Health estimates that some 2.7 million people have some form of combined sight and hearing loss. We are very much representing the tip of the iceberg.

Mark Isherwood: And some of us are under 60.

Mr Carr: Yes.

Ann Jones: That is interesting. I started off by saying that political parties are probably among the worst people for producing glossy leaflets that will not help some people. I think that most political parties will provide an alternative format, but I do not know how well we provide that alternative. Do you have any ideas about what the most appropriate alternative way of disseminating information would be, given that political parties could only adopt a handful of methods, and that they will pick the one that they think will reach the most people with that particular disability? Is there an alternative format that would bring some of those members into the fold straight away—one that is easier to do? Would changing the font type or font size be an example?

Mr Carr: We recommend that the standard font size should be 14. It is readily accepted that 12 is the usual font size. Rather than just thinking of large print consideration, information should also be in clear print. Some of the formats are very readily available without too much cost. Clear print would encompass things like the background and the character setting and spacing. The RNIB provides some very good guidelines in 'See it Right' on what a good clear print format should be. If you work to a clear print guideline rather than a large print guideline, you would cover the needs of far more people and you would be able to cover a far wider range of formats.

Ms McCain: We are hoping that, with the self-help groups that are going to be set up throughout Wales, we can provide a forum in which our members will be able to discuss information that they have received and say what they think about it, perhaps providing some feedback to you or other organisations about the accessibility of information and how it has been received. The process can be an ongoing one.

Ann Jones: That is handy to know, because I know that we are guilty at election times of just trying to provide the glossier leaflets with the prettiest colours, and that often gets lost on people who have a sight impairment. You have given us some pointers that indicate that the Assembly website could definitely do with being altered. If Members are happy to do this, we will write that into the recommendations. We will try to draw together some sort of report to send on. Bethan, did you want to say something?

Bethan Jenkins: I just wanted to ask the witnesses whether they could be part of—I do not know the name of it off the top of my head—this new group made up of people who are interested in the development of the website, and perhaps they could refer to other groups that may be interested.

Ann Jones: We will also ask the people who manage the Welsh Assembly Government's website, because the National Assembly for Wales website is separate from that, as you know.

Mr Carr: I have looked at the Welsh Assembly Government website, and it is better—a lot better.

Ann Jones: The Assembly Government gets an extra point, then—although we will not tell it until the end of the report. ["Laughter."] This will be a test of how many members of the Welsh Assembly Government listen to the proceedings of the Committee on Equality of Opportunity; if we do not tell them until the very end, they will not know before that unless they have been listening.

When we write this short report to the Minister for Social Justice and Local Government, we will say that clear print is the way forward for the websites. We will also get some guidance on the section 7 issue, and the witnesses will send us a breakdown of the 14 different systems of alternative written communication, such as Braille. I was interested in that. I tried to think of how many I was aware of, and I realised that it was just six or so, and then I was lost. Is there anything else that Members want to add to this short report apart from writing to Ministers and getting information from them?

Bethan Jenkins: Should we also ask the RNIB about its access to information policies?

Ann Jones: Yes, we can do that.

Eleanor Burnham: We could ask the RNID too.

Ann Jones: Yes. Committee secretariat will be busy all afternoon now. ["Laughter."] They will not have any lunch today. Mark, you wanted to make a point.

<p>Mark Isherwood: Are we focusing just on the public sector, and if not, should we also talk to representative bodies from other sectors?</p>
<p>Ann Jones: I was thinking more of getting our own house in order initially. If we can do that, and catch up with the Assembly Government, we can perhaps go to outside bodies as the next stage. However, if we do so without being totally—</p>
<p>Eleanor Burnham: Accessible.</p>
<p>Ann Jones: 'Bomb-proof' was the word that I was thinking of, though it is probably not the best word to use. We cannot go to outside bodies and tell them what we want them to do while we still have faults of our own to correct. I take the point, though, and we could add a paragraph stating that further work may be needed outside the public sector.</p>
<p>Joyce Watson: Some examples of best practice might add value to this. If we could present a package showing the organisations that are doing it well and what works, that would be more than useful for everyone.</p>
<p>Eleanor Burnham: We could also highlight the point about banking, because it is very serious. If people cannot access banking, that is a huge problem. The same applies to health services.</p>
<p>Ann Jones: I think that that was the point that Mark was alluding to. The idea is to get our own house in order first. However, we can add a paragraph on that, pointing out the evidence on issues with access to banking, health services, and so on that can make life very difficult for people.</p>
<p>If that is all, we will draft the report, send it to the Minister, and wait for the information to come to us. Is everyone happy with the recommendations? I see that you are.</p>
<p>I thank both witnesses. It has been an interesting session. Thank you for coming. We will hopefully get our house in order, and then we will be able to go out and assist you in telling others about this issue.</p>

10.49 a.m.

Cynnig Trefniadol Procedural Motion

<p>Ann Jones: We now need a formal proposal to exclude the public from the rest of meeting, while we meet with the standing invitees.</p>
<p>Mark Isherwood: I propose that</p>
<p>"the committee resolves to exclude the public from the remainder of the meeting in accordance with Standing Order No. 10.37(vi)."</p>
<p>Ann Jones: I see that the committee is in agreement.</p> <p>"Derbyniwyd y cynnig."</p> <p>"Motion carried."</p>
<p>"Daeth rhan gyhoeddus y cyfarfod i ben am 10.49 p.m. The public part of the meeting ended at 10.49 p.m."</p>