



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

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

**Mawrth, 21 Medi 2010  
Tuesday, 21 September 2010**

**Cynnwys**  
**Contents**

- 3 Cyflwyniad, Ymddiheuriadau a Dirprwyon  
Introduction, Apologies and Substitutions
- 4 Hygyrchedd Gorsafoddd Pleidleisio yng Nghymru  
Accessibility of Polling Stations in Wales
- 10 Y Wybodaeth Ddiweddaraf am Gynllun Gydraddoldeb Sengl Llywodraeth Cynulliad  
Cymru  
Update on the Welsh Assembly Government's Single Equality Scheme

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
Veronica German	Democratiaid Rhyddfrydol Cymru Welsh Liberal Democrats
Ann Jones	Llafur (Cadeirydd y Pwyllgor) Labour (Committee Chair)
Joyce Watson	Llafur Labour

**Eraill yn bresennol**  
**Others in attendance**

Frank Cuthbert	Pennaeth y Tîm Democratiaeth Llywodraeth Leol, Llywodraeth Cynulliad Cymru of Local Government Democracy Team, Welsh Assembly Government
Gill Lambert	Pennaeth yr Is-adran Cydraddoldeb, Amrywiaeth a Chynwysiant, Llywodraeth Cynulliad Cymru Head of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Team, Welsh Assembly Government
Carl Sargeant	Aelod Cynulliad, Llafur (Y Gweinidog dros Gyfiawnder Cymdeithasol a Llywodraeth Leol) Assembly Member, Labour (The Minister for Social Justice and Local Government)

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

Catherine Hunt	Dirprwy Glerc Deputy Clerk
Claire Morris	Clerc Clerk

*Dechreuodd y cyfarfod am 9.31 a.m.*  
*The meeting began at 9.31 a.m.*

**Cyflwyniad, Ymddiheuriadau a Dirprwyon**  
**Introduction, Apologies and Substitutions**

[1] **Ann Jones:** Good morning, everyone, and welcome to the first meeting of the Committee on Equality of Opportunity following the summer recess. I welcome Veronica German to her first meeting of this committee—you are most welcome, Veronica; we look forward to having you on board. At this point, we need to place on record our thanks to Eleanor Burnham for her work throughout the last session, and for her dedication to questioning the witnesses; I am sure that we will miss her unique style of questioning.

[2] Do Members wish to declare any interests, under Standing Order No. 31.6? I see that you do not. Please ensure that mobile phones, pagers and BlackBerrys are switched off—you can keep your pacemakers on—as they affect the translation equipment. I remind the committee that the Assembly operates bilingually. Channel 0 on the headsets provides the

floor language, and channel 1 provides the translation. We are not expecting a fire alarm this morning, so if fire alarms go off, you can either follow me out, because I will be one of the first people out of the building, or you can wait for directions from the ushers as to where we need to go.

9.33 a.m.

### **Hygyrchedd Gorsafoddd Pleidleisio yng Nghymru Accessibility of Polling Stations in Wales**

[3] **Ann Jones:** I welcome the Minister for Social Justice and Local Government to committee. He will be with us all morning.

[4] **The Minister for Social Justice and Local Government (Carl Sargeant):** Thank you. Good morning.

[5] **Ann Jones:** Thank you for coming to committee, Minister—we try to keep you busy. We also welcome Frank Cuthbert, who is the head of the Welsh Government's .. We are going to look first of all at the accessibility of polling stations in Wales. You will remember, Minister, that this committee undertook a review on this issue. It completed its inquiry and published its report and recommendations in 2007. In March 2010, we invited witnesses back to committee, to give us evidence again, to see what progress had been made. The Electoral Commission and the Association of Electoral Administrators felt that there had been some improvements in accessibility, but Scope felt that little progress had been made since 2007. We have therefore invited you along in order to tease out a few more ideas from you. I will ask the first question. Could you remind the committee of the composition of the elections planning group, its remit and where it sits in relation to your functions as Minister?

[6] **Carl Sargeant:** Good morning. It is a pleasure to be here again. It is not so long ago that we were with you, but it is nice to be with you again this morning.

[7] This is a rolling programme. The difficulties regarding polling stations have been with us for some time, and it is about driving improvement. It seems to be an uphill struggle, but I believe that there are some positive signs that some changes have been made, as you mentioned, and as the Electoral Commission notes. You asked about the composition of the planning group. The group consists of officers from the Welsh Assembly Government, the Wales Office, the UK Cabinet Office, the Electoral Commission, the Association of Electoral Administrators, returning officers—I have a list, because I thought that this might come up—the Welsh Local Government Association and, of course, the four main political parties, Ann. It is important to say that the forum does not have a formal remit, but that it is used for discussion of electoral procedures, which include polling stations; it functions on an advisory level for me.

[8] **Ann Jones:** You wrote to us in April of this year to say that the elections planning group had agreed to encourage returning officers to engage with local disability groups and their own authorities' equality officers when planning for elections. Do you have any idea how they are planning for the next election, which will be the Assembly elections in May, or the referenda prior to that?

[9] **Carl Sargeant:** I have taken a personal interest in this, and I have spoken about it publicly and to Scope, which we met, on another occasion. The responsibility for elections is shared between us and the Ministry of Justice. I am writing to the chief executives personally to find out what their expectations are and to detail what my expectation is, and about how we can move forward on accessibility issues around polling stations. I expect that letter to be sent

this week—I know that Frank has been scribbling away in preparation for it. It will be sent as soon as possible, and I will be more than happy to share the responses with you, Chair, as soon as I have them.

[10] **Ann Jones:** We still have to have temporary ramps, which is an issue, and you provide some funding for that. Given the current economic climate, do you intend to continue to fund 50 per cent of the cost of those ramps?

[11] **Carl Sargeant:** That is still my intention. On the funding streams, I said earlier on that the responsibility has moved from Ministry of Justice to the Cabinet Office—I think that I am right in saying that—but we are still unclear about its funding streams. We would fund around 50 per cent of the cost, that is, an equal share. The discussions are ongoing, but I do not anticipate that I would wish to move away from that arrangement. We all have a part to play in moving this agenda forward; it is a long-standing and difficult agenda, and it will only change if we continue to invest.

[12] **Ann Jones:** How do you intend to remind local authorities of their responsibilities under the disability discrimination legislation in the run-up to the Assembly elections?

[13] **Carl Sargeant:** The Disability Discrimination Act 1995 compliance goes hand in hand with the accessibility of polling stations; those issues are combined and will be included in my letter to the chief executives, which will allude to that and state what our expectations of them are and ask how they will comply with the DDA.

[14] **Ann Jones:** Can you give us a timescale for that letter, given that you need to give local authorities sufficient time for them to address the issues?

[15] **Carl Sargeant:** I expect that I will be writing to them this week.

[16] **Ann Jones:** That is good.

[17] **Carl Sargeant:** The letter would have been sent by now had it not been for the fact that, operationally, this is our first week of Assembly business. Our progress on this has been interesting, and perhaps it would be useful for me to offer the committee an account of it; we offered to meet with Scope after receiving its report, to go through it and see whether we could move the agenda forward. Unfortunately, Scope has been unable to come up with dates for a meeting. We were hoping to have a discussion, and to move forward on the back of that. The letter has been a bit delayed because we are just trying to understand the issues in relation to Scope and so on. That is not to say that Scope has not been very positive and proactive in its approach to this matter; it is that diary timings have proven to be difficult. I will send the letter this week, and we will meet Scope as soon as possible, when it is able to arrange some dates. There has been an issue with collating information from the interested parties.

9.40 a.m.

[18] **Ann Jones:** Veronica, did you want to come in here?

[19] **Veronica German:** Yes. My point is linked to that. The Scope report stated that although some polling stations did have devices available and large-print ballot papers and so on, the staff in the polling stations did not even know where they were, or how to access them. It is a slightly broader issue than just having them say, 'This is what we need'. There is a whole bigger issue surrounding this.

[20] **Carl Sargeant:** I absolutely agree. This is not just about providing arrangements or putting physical things in place to support compliance, but about knowing how to use them or

giving people access to them. There is a training element involved in this, and I believe that the chief executives or the returning officers have a role to play in this, which is what I want to understand. That conversation with Scope would have been useful prior to us moving forward. Nevertheless, I think that this is progressive. We just have to move forward on that.

[21] **Mr Cuthbert:** The report from Scope was disappointing. There have been several—I would almost say ‘many’—elections in which the tactile voting devices have been or should have been available for use, and we have helped to finance them. The polling staff should have been trained in how to use them. After all, unless the staff are trained, a blind or partially sighted person coming in who has not used the devices before would, of course, not be able to use them.

[22] **Joyce Watson:** Good morning, Minister. The Polls Apart 2010 report concluded that 67 per cent of polling stations in Wales had one or more significant access barriers to disabled voters. What are your ambitions for the Assembly elections in 2011 in terms of the accessibility of polling stations to disabled people?

[23] **Carl Sargeant:** I am very careful about wishing for numbers. However, we must have ambition. Our ambition is to solve this problem, but I do not think that you can ever solve the problem completely. Something new will always come up in different polling stations at different times. It is about being progressive; we must push returning officers at polling stations to recognise that they have a duty to move this agenda forward. I would hope for significant progress. I would not feel comfortable being tied down to a number. This is about working together. I will not back off from returning officers and chief executives in my ambition to have a better place for people to express their democratic rights in and better access. I will be pushing that through the letter, which I will share with the committee as soon as it has been sent, as I will do the findings, of course.

[24] **Joyce Watson:** Do you have any plans to find out more about the barriers experienced by disabled voters in Wales? Is it likely that the Welsh Government will be providing funding for a Polls Apart survey in 2011?

[25] **Carl Sargeant:** Some of it is around capacity. We have a lot coming up: we have the referendum and then the Assembly elections. I do not know what Scope wants to do in terms of looking at future elections. As I have said, we have tried to engage and open some dialogue with it, and we are nearly there. If a request comes in for funding for that, I would have to consider it very carefully. We will have to consider what we would get from the report that would be different to the one that we will have shortly and whether we could invest that money better in physical provision at polling stations or whether we would want another report. We have to assess what is best to do the job. Do we put more money into changing the environment of polling stations, or do we want a report to tell us that it is not good? It is a matter of striking a balance. We will open up some dialogue with Scope to see whether we can move forward on that.

[26] **Joyce Watson:** What work has been done by the Welsh Government to ensure that the link created by the members of the Equality and Human Rights Commission on the elections planning group is making local authorities aware of their local access groups and involving them in training procedures?

[27] **Carl Sargeant:** This goes back to the question that Veronica raised earlier about the whole training package. It is about a bigger picture than just polling stations, is it not? It is about the package around voting: how and where we can enable people to gain access and who those people are. That will be clearly spelt out in the letter to the chief executives about what my expectations are and what their duties are. They should not need to be reminded about equality rights. Unfortunately, the representative of the Equality and Human Rights

Commission did not last long on the panel and withdrew their membership shortly after joining it, for whatever reason—I am not sure what it was. I return to the point that local authorities should not need to be reminded of their duties, but I will do so in the letter.

[28] **Ann Jones:** On that point, I would imagine that previous Ministers have written to local authorities to remind them of their duties before previous elections, yet we know that there is a deficit in the training. We know that tactile voting devices are available and that we have sent out guidance about lighting polling stations, yet you still find that your polling station is in a church hall that is not lit or that there are steps up to it, and because there are only two steps, most people think that that is fine and they do not put out the ramp, so the ramp is stored in someone's car or somewhere else. I know that your intentions are good and that you are new in the post, but we are still in this situation. We have been trying to tackle these issues and previous Ministers have come and said, 'It is my intention to write to local authorities', but we do not seem to be getting anywhere. Are there any sanctions that you could impose on returning officers who do not provide fully accessible polling stations?

[29] **Carl Sargeant:** I will take that in two parts. This committee and other Ministers have been very committed to this. It is clear that because of that there has been a slow, but marked improvement year on year. Is it quick enough? No. Is it acceptable? No. We had a discussion on this yesterday, and it is a bit like the terrier scenario—you have to keep nipping at them to move them on a little more. You wish that they would move along much more quickly, but it is not happening. Consistent pressure from this committee, from me as a Minister and from all previous Ministers has moved the agenda on. However, on sanctions, I do not know whether Frank might be able to help us on the detail, but we just have to keep this high on the agenda and consistently say to chief executives, 'You have a duty here, and you should deliver'.

[30] **Mr Cuthbert:** The only sanction that I could imagine would be if we were to change the way in which the elections are financed, so that a certain amount of finance was withheld until after a report had been received on accessibility. That would cause a storm among returning officers who would say that the Assembly Government was not providing the necessary funds to pay the wages of the counting clerks and the polling clerks. It would be an unprecedented approach. So, it would be difficult.

[31] I noticed in the Electoral Commission's report on the elections that it is lobbying for the UK Government to change the electoral legislation so that returning officers would have the power to use any public building in their area as a polling station. As most public buildings are now compliant with the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, that would be a big step forward. It is a problem that there are not public buildings in every polling district, but that would still be a marked improvement.

9.50 a.m.

[32] **Veronica German:** In the end it comes down to the mindset, does it not? It is about the mindset of the returning officer in those polling stations. For example, Scope addressed some features of accessibility that might not be the same as compliance with the Disability Discrimination Act, such as having a chair for people to sit in before they leave. Although I do not like bureaucracy, and I think that the less form-filling there is, the better, something as simple as a checklist for the returning officer at the polling station might solve the problem. It could include questions like, 'Have you put the ramp out?'. It might not be relevant for every polling station, but they could do it if it is. Other examples could be, 'Is there a chair for someone to sit down on?', and, 'Do staff know how to use all the equipment?'. They should not just have to tick those boxes, but actually go around and check those things, and if they do not, perhaps sanctions should be imposed on that returning officer, and perhaps they should not be allowed to do that job again.

[33] **Carl Sargeant:** That is something that we might consider. Another possible sanction, if you want to put it that way—and something that you may want to write to me about as a committee—is an outcome agreement. That is about driving improvement, and when the outcome is not obtained, there is a financial penalty. I do not know whether the committee feels that strongly about it or whether it feels that it would be appropriate to include that kind of penalty in outcome agreements with authorities. It might be too big a stick, if you like, or it might be something that you would want to consider.

[34] **Mohammad Asghar:** Good morning, Minister. In 2007, the committee recommended that the Welsh Assembly Government should encourage local authorities to draw more effectively on existing resources within their organisations. What progress has been made in encouraging local authorities to do so in order to improve accessibility to polling stations?

[35] **Carl Sargeant:** I cannot give you a detailed answer on that now, Oscar, but what I can do is ask that question of chief executives. It goes hand in hand with a message that I have been putting across anyway: about collaboration, within and externally, about what we do and how we deliver services and duties now. I have asked authorities, and most are responding, to consider whether, just because something has been done in a certain way for 20 years, it is necessarily the best way to do it. I have challenged them to look at their procedures and ask whether there is a better way of doing things—a more cost-effective way with a better service outcome. Many of them are responding to that. Perhaps I need to tease more detail out for you; I do not have it to hand today, but I will ask for that for you.

[36] **Mohammad Asghar:** In your view, does the Welsh Assembly Government have a role, alongside other organisations, in encouraging disabled people to vote in the forthcoming referendum on bringing Part 4 of the Government of Wales Act 2006 into force?

[37] **Carl Sargeant:** As the Welsh Assembly Government, we do not have a duty to promote this—that is a duty of the Electoral Commission. However, as a Government, and as an Assembly, I am hoping that we will have a role. I am waiting for a response from the Presiding Officer about jointly hosting an event on registration and access to polling stations for the elections. I think that that is within the next month or two—certainly before Christmas. I believe that the Presiding Officer is keen to host this event—it is just a case of when. We will work alongside the Electoral Commission on how we can collectively promote registration and participation by all. That is an event that we are hoping to host here, but the duty to promote engagement, and that process, is one for the Electoral Commission. Needless to say, we will do what we can to help.

[38] **Mohammad Asghar:** I am grateful for what you are doing with regard to the information that you are gathering from able people, but are you communicating with disabled people in this respect?

[39] **Carl Sargeant:** We consider that everyone is in, that no-one is out, and that we are inclusive. As I said earlier, this is a duty for the Electoral Commission. The part that we can play as Government is about participation, and that is what we are trying to engage in. We are encouraging people to take part in the democratic process regardless of disability, race, or gender. It is about being inclusive. However, the duty with regard to communication is on the Electoral Commission and not WAG.

[40] **Veronica German:** In the Government of Wales Act 2006, matter 12.9 states that the Assembly can legislate in respect of

[41] ‘electoral arrangements for elected local government institutions for communities’.



[42] However, it also stipulates that ‘electoral arrangements’ does not include electoral registration and administration. Can you clarify whether the Assembly is able to legislate in respect of access to polling stations for local elections in Wales?

[43] **Carl Sargeant:** No. That is the easy answer. [*Laughter.*]

[44] The conduct of local elections is a matter for returning officers. It is not a devolved area to us, but sits firmly and squarely with them. I think that the legislation that you referred to refers to the reviewing of electoral arrangements of communities, which is carried out by the Boundary Commission for Wales. Therefore, the powers are not devolved to us; they are based with the returning officer. I think that I am right, Frank, am I not?

[45] **Mr Cuthbert:** Yes.

[46] **Veronica German:** It is all a bit confusing.

[47] **Carl Sargeant:** It is a technical question.

[48] **Mr Cuthbert:** And lawyers’ wording.

[49] **Veronica German:** Yes, absolutely. To what extent does the Minister accept Scope’s observations that having two languages

[50] ‘can create additional potential barriers to accessibility’?

[51] **Carl Sargeant:** It may extend beyond that. It is not just about the two languages, because we have language barriers across every function that we find ourselves working within. This is specifically for elections, so I would imagine that it will be primarily English or Welsh. The use of two languages could be seen to present a problem and we have to be open about that. There are some challenges that people might face around the language barrier and that is something that I would be happy for the planning group to put on the agenda for the next time around to see whether it agrees. If there is a solution to the problem—if there is a problem—I would also be happy to share that information with you.

[52] **Veronica German:** I suppose that it is about whether people think that they have to do things twice, and that because they have more paper it is more of a burden. It should not be, but maybe that is something that is in their mindset.

[53] **Carl Sargeant:** That comes with a bilingual country.

[54] **Veronica German:** Yes. It should be taken as read, but it is interesting to see that they have been using that as an issue.

[55] **Carl Sargeant:** We have just come back from a two-week tour of Wales—a bit of a pop-group type of event, I suppose. [*Laughter.*] No, it was nothing like that, actually.

[56] It was interesting to see the effects of the language in different parts of Wales; from Anglesey to Monmouth it was very different. The language played a different part in different areas. It is a factor that we have to consider, so I would be happy for the electoral group to give me some more advice on that.

[57] **Veronica German:** And the Welsh Language Board possibly.

[58] **Carl Sargeant:** Yes, I will ask the planning group to consider that as an agenda item and I would expect that it would consider consulting the Welsh Language Board on those

issues.

10.00 a.m.

[59] **Ann Jones:** On the language problem, would you consider using symbols rather than the words ‘polling station’, so you would use a symbol showing how you would vote? It would not matter about language then, as you would use a visual symbol. In that way, you might get over the language barrier.

[60] **Carl Sargeant:** I think that that is a good idea, but I am not knowledgeable enough to know whether it is the right answer. Again, there are people in my department who would be able to advise me on that. I am happy to consider that point, Ann.

[61] **Ann Jones:** Thank you. Does anyone else have any more questions for the Minister? I see that you do not.

[62] **Carl Sargeant:** To finish, as we said at the start, this is a recurring subject—it is on the agenda year after year, and it comes up at every election. My commitment is no less than that of other Ministers, and I know that your committee’s remit is to push this agenda. I will meet with representatives from Scope to move the agenda on with them, and I will be writing to the chief executives this week to ensure that the issue is firmly placed on their agenda and to see what responses we get back. When I get some feedback, I will be more than happy to share it with the committee.

[63] **Ann Jones:** Thanks for that. We thank you and Frank Cuthbert for attending. I think that you are staying with us, Minister—‘Unfortunately’, he says.

[64] **Carl Sargeant:** Are you sure that you do not want Frank instead? [*Laughter.*]

[65] **Ann Jones:** I am sure that Frank would do an excellent job.

[66] **Carl Sargeant:** He would.

[67] **Ann Jones:** Thank you very much.

10.01 a.m.

**Y Wybodaeth Ddiweddaraf am Gynllun Gydraddoldeb Sengl Llywodraeth  
Cynulliad Cymru  
Update on the Welsh Assembly Government’s Single Equality Scheme**

[68] **Ann Jones:** It is nice to welcome Gill Lambert, head of the equality, diversity and inclusion team. For the record, I note that you are still here as Minister, Carl. This item is to receive an update on the Welsh Assembly Government’s single equality scheme. I know that you have a statement to make this afternoon, Minister, so it will probably be quite difficult to tease out answers to some of the questions. Had we known, perhaps we could have done this—

[69] **Carl Sargeant:** Tomorrow. [*Laughter.*]

[70] **Ann Jones:** Yes, perhaps we could have had another committee meeting. Welsh Ministers decided to develop and publish a single equality scheme; what have been the benefits of this approach?

[71] **Carl Sargeant:** Thank you again, Chair, for the opportunity to be with you this

morning. This is topical, actually, because there was something on the television last night—*The One Show*, I think that it was called—about equal pay and equality schemes. This has all come to fruition today.

[72] You are quite right to say that I have a statement to make later today on the Equality Act 2010, and you shall find out a bit more about that this afternoon. In terms of the decision around a single equality scheme and where we are now, it was taken by Welsh Ministers to develop and publish a single scheme for gender, race, disability, religion, belief and non-belief, age, transgender issues, and sexual orientation. We did that because we wanted to bring a holistic view to a person, as opposed to individual strands of the scheme. You cannot put people in a box, because they do not fit into that. The scenario would be a disabled black woman, and there would be three equality strands for her. We are trying to have a single scheme that addresses them all. We can address the discrimination on all levels then.

[73] We have been encouraged by the way that it has been operating across strands and across all ministerial portfolio work. Again, it is about how we ensure the wholesale approach to the whole person, and not just individual parts. So, that was our intention, and I think that that is happening.

[74] **Ann Jones:** How effective has that single equality scheme been in assessing the impact of policies on those different groups within Wales?

[75] **Carl Sargeant:** We use some techie stuff. The vehicle that we use to assess policies of different groups within the population of Wales is inclusive policy making—the IPM. It is the model that we use in the Welsh Assembly Government to measure the equality impact assessments of groups. It ensures that the diverse needs of citizens and their communities are considered in all the policies and practices that we as a Government consider, so we test this on the person or the community in all of our decisions. We must comply by law to complete the equality impact assessments on policies, and it is quite a difficult process because we try to make sure that we include everything. There are many challenges in courts to equality impact assessments, and there are many failures, not because people do not wish to do it right, but because it is quite complex and sometimes they get it wrong because people make genuine mistakes. However, we encourage our staff to use the process to consider all equality strands. We have guidance on how to use them; I do not know whether it would be useful for you to see that as a committee, but I am happy for you to do so. I was at a Cabinet meeting yesterday where many of our discussions featured equality in the consideration of budgets and future budget planning. That is a test that we do, so it does work.

[76] **Ann Jones:** There are case studies in your paper that refer to Gypsies and Travellers, refugees and vulnerable children. Another refers to the proposed Children and Families (Wales) Measure 2010. How will you monitor the effect? How do you tie it all together effectively? How confident are you that the proposed Measure and the example in your paper will produce the goods?

[77] **Carl Sargeant:** I will go through why we have put in some of the examples first, just to refocus our minds. We have included a reference to Gypsies and Travellers, which is one of the most disenfranchised groups in society. We are working to tackle this through many of our schemes, based on evidence that has been built up. In 2006, WAG commissioned Pat Niner from the University of Birmingham to undertake work on Gypsy/Traveller sites. The report identified a need for the provision of Traveller sites in Wales, which can sometimes be a hugely controversial issue. Local authorities have a duty to act on this. However, we are talking about the culture and way of life of people and their children. I have, sadly, been challenged on many occasions because we are investing in proper site provision to turn the life chances of young people around. Gypsies and Travellers pay council tax, rates and duties. It may not be the cultural life that some people would choose to live, but they do, so we have

a duty as a Government—particularly me as Minister for equality—to support vulnerable people. Gypsy/Traveller children in particular have been identified as such a group. The life expectancy of a Gypsy child is a lot lower than mainstream children; that cannot be right. So, we have to do something to step into that programme, although we also have to look at the bigger picture of where sites are situated. In that regard, the whole planning process is very difficult, but we cannot ignore it either. That is the reason why I included the Gypsy element in the paper.

[78] We have the same scenario around refugees. Asylum seekers and refugees are some of the most vulnerable people living in Wales today, as they have little support in some areas and none in other areas.

10.10 a.m.

[79] Many of these people have experienced persecution, war, conflict and rape. We are talking about human beings; no matter who they are, they are the same as us, and if we cannot support people in that position in the twenty-first century, it is a pretty sad indictment of our society. That is why we included the refugee strategy. The focus on vulnerable children really goes without saying; that is the overarching picture of protecting the most vulnerable. Again, the Children and Families (Wales) Measure 2010 makes statutory provision for taking forward the Welsh Assembly Government's commitment to tackling child poverty. So, I hope that it is now evident why I included those groups.

[80] On the broader issue of monitoring how we progress, with regard to monitoring the Children and Families (Wales) Measure, we recognise that monitoring the new child poverty strategy and delivery plan will be crucial. We have recently established the child poverty programme board, which will reach across all WAG departments. Again, going back to what I said at the beginning about not, as ministries, sitting in our silos thinking about how what we do will have an impact in only our own departments, it is about considering the impact of the actions of other Ministers on our communities. So, we are getting a better working relationship across WAG because of the single equality strands that we have introduced.

[81] **Ann Jones:** Thanks very much.

[82] **Mohammad Asghar:** Can the Minister provide an update on the progress being made to ensure that older and disabled people are able to live safely and independently in their own homes?

[83] **Carl Sargent:** Thank you, Oscar. As a Government, we provided £7.5 million in 2009-10 for physical adaptation grants, which I think provided for adaptation work for the homes of approximately 1,500 tenants. Some of the work included installing stair lifts and handrails. Again, it is not about moving someone out of their home but providing a service that can keep them in their home, which is where most people want to be. So, we recognise that that is important work and an important funding stream.

[84] We also fund the disabled facilities grant for local authorities. There is mandatory testing for this. In 2008-09, councils across Wales spent just under £35 million on DFGs. I have a concern about the vast difference in the lengths of time authorities take to implement DFGs; some take 12 months while some take two weeks for assessment and delivery. So, perhaps I can do more work on that with local authorities, pressing them to deliver the provisions for supporting vulnerable and disabled people in their homes. I think that we have some of the grant systems right. I do not think that it will ever be enough money, will it? There is always something more that you could do. However, I think that we have the process right; it is just about the delivery.

[85] As we have been going around Wales, part of my message has been about sharing best practice. Some have it to a T, while some are still learning. So, in our department, we have a responsibility to try to explore how, with my local government hat on, we can support local authorities to get better at service delivery. There are other elements to this, such as Care and Repair, which you are probably familiar with. The 22 authorities run that. Given where we are financially and the pressures we find ourselves under, it may be that we need to create closer alignment between the grant systems. We have three clear elements of funding all doing something similar and maybe we should draw those together and look holistically at the packages that we can provide. I do not know whether that might be an option.

[86] **Veronica German:** I would like to add that that is very important. I have cases where people have applied for one funding stream and have been told, 'We cannot help you unless you have tried to go through your local authority first'. Then they have to go back, fill in forms again for which there might be slightly different criteria and so on. We are talking about a vulnerable person—an old person—who needs that help as soon as possible. In the case of many of these process-led moneys that people need to access, there are ways of improving the system. We have seen a lot of work recently, in which I have been interested, to cut down the time that it takes to access housing benefits for example. There have been dramatic improvements in how that can be done. If that can be done in one or two councils, it can be done everywhere. It frees up more money for them to be able to use for the people who need it. It is crucial to start to bring some of these processes together, even if they are still separate funds, in order to make it easier for a person to access this money. That is crucial, when you think about the amount of time spent by officers in councils answering queries on why someone has not yet received a grant instead of getting that grant to that person. We are talking about a waste of time and money. Meanwhile, you have vulnerable people who are desperately waiting to be able to live their lives in the same way as everyone else.

[87] **Carl Sargeant:** We have explored the one-stop-shop approach, where you can access a service there and then and are not told to go somewhere else. Local authorities in some areas are exploring that approach.

[88] To return to what I said earlier, this is about looking at what services we provide, and because we have provided them for years in a certain way, that does not make them right. We must be innovative in how we operate throughout the entire public sector—going across local authorities and beyond. We must ask what we do and who does what where best and that is a big challenge for people. However, simply wishing to go down this route is no longer an option—it is essential that we do so; otherwise, the vulnerable will lose out. So, I am very much behind that agenda.

[89] **Mohammad Asghar:** How is the Welsh Assembly Government working with the Department for Transport to improve access to transport services for disabled people?

[90] **Carl Sargeant:** This is a difficult question. The services that are or are not currently available are wide-ranging. On our engagement in this, we are involved with the disabled persons transport advisory committee, which gives us advice. It used to advise the UK Government on transport needs for disabled people, but the Welsh Assembly Government has a nominee on that committee—is that the case, Gill?

[91] **Ms Lambert:** The post has not been established yet.

[92] **Carl Sargeant:** There will be someone on that committee to consider the Welsh dimension to this in terms of information seeking. That will be useful for us, although our officials currently meet regularly with the advisory committee to understand relevant issues.

[93] On the Welsh dimension, rail access is an issue. I have heard the Chair on many

occasions raise access to stations and so on with the Minister for the Economy and Transport. The Department for Transport's Access for All project aims to provide infrastructure improvements to stations, but we are talking about a massive infrastructure—that is not an excuse, but a fact. Again, they are trying to increase funding in order to change some of the physical factors at stations that prevent people from gaining access to trains. It would not only be a case of making physical adaptations such as putting in steps, ramps and so on, as there are visual aspects as well, such as knowing where the end of the platform is, and those are important factors. It is about being able to upgrade and so on.

10.20 a.m.

[94] Another aspect is the blue badge scheme in Wales, and the Deputy First Minister published a blue badge action plan in January of this year to modernise the scheme. It was not fit for purpose before, so we needed to look at how we could move on and how the scheme delivers. We are looking at the UK approach to sharing information on blue badge schemes, for example on users who misuse them and fraudulent activity in relation to the schemes. So, that gives you a flavour with regard to the railways and blue badges. I am aware of other schemes involving audiovisual announcements, to which I have alluded. It is not always about physical adaptations of platforms as there are other things around that as well. We are working very closely with the Department for Transport to investigate the costs of that to see whether we can help and support that programme as well.

[95] **Mohammad Asghar:** Minister, I am very grateful for the transport system when it comes to trains, but there are audiovisual systems in buses, particularly for the blind. That is a crucial point for your department to consider, for the benefit of disabled, blind and partially sighted people in Wales.

[96] **Carl Sargeant:** As I know you are aware, that does not sit in my box in respect of delivery, but this point goes back to the scheme and considerations across departments with regard to what we do and the impact of that. I am more than happy to feed them back to the Minister with responsibility for transport—I think that he has heard it on several occasions, but I will tell him again.

[97] **Ann Jones:** Could you tell him as the Minister with responsibility for equality, and do it from that angle, rather than as the Minister with responsibility for local government and social justice?

[98] **Carl Sargeant:** I am happy to do that. I will copy the committee in, if that is helpful.

[99] **Mohammad Asghar:** That is happening in London and all over England, and it is the norm, so why not in Wales? That is my point.

[100] **Carl Sargeant:** I think that there are some trials in Cardiff.

[101] **Mohammad Asghar:** I think that there are some in Newport as well.

[102] **Carl Sargeant:** I will try to get further details for you.

[103] **Ann Jones:** I will put in a bid for a trial in north Wales, Joyce will put one in for west Wales, and Veronica will put one in for south-east Wales. Veronica, did you want to come in?

[104] **Veronica German:** I was going to make the same point, but shall I go on?

[105] **Ann Jones:** Yes, fine.

[106] **Veronica German:** The single equality scheme has been running for three years. Given the current economic climate, do you intend to make any changes to any of the priorities in the scheme? Do you think that there is a risk, given the financial pressures on Government departments, that this issue will fall away? How do you stop that from happening? That is down to you, is it not?

[107] **Carl Sargeant:** Thank you for your question, Veronica. I play an important part in this respect, but it is a broader issue than one that involves just me. We acknowledge the difficult economic surroundings that we find ourselves in, but other public bodies are operating in this scenario as well. However, we still have some statutory duties and, regardless of the economic issue, we have to deliver these services. That remains a priority for me even in difficult economic times; that goes without saying. As to whether I see any changes being made, you will have to wait until this afternoon for a statement on equality issues, but to give you a flavour, which I think would be reasonable, it relates to public sector equality duties. What we are suggesting that public bodies should do may be included in some further deliberations that you may be interested in. [*Laughter.*]

[108] **Ann Jones:** That just ensures that we read the statement when we get it.

[109] **Carl Sargeant:** Exactly.

[110] **Joyce Watson:** Concerns have been expressed that expected cuts in budgets will have a disproportionate impact on some groups in Wales. How will you as a Minister of the Welsh Government ensure that the expected cuts in the budgets and public services do not have a disproportionate impact on some groups of people, who might be women or people living on low incomes?

[111] **Carl Sargeant:** That is a very broad question about our holistic approach, which is about the person and not the strand. We are trying to look at this holistically. To refer to what I said earlier, economically, we are going to find ourselves in difficult and challenging times. I said earlier that budgetary talks that we had as recently as yesterday have focused heavily on the equality agenda. I ensure that we consider it at all times. Aside from the moral element, there is a common-sense element to this. If we make a bad decision, the problem does not go away; it just has an effect somewhere else. For example, if the health department made a decision on budget impact, the problem would not go away, but it might land on the doorstep of a local authority, which comes under my budget. So, we have to be much cleverer in the way we operate.

[112] The single strand equality scheme, which encourages my Cabinet colleagues and me to have broader discussions about the impact, will, I hope, pick up everybody. However, I accept that the impact of cuts to budgets will have a bigger effect on our poorest and most vulnerable communities. That is something that we have to understand better, so that we do not make those mistakes. I am not saying that we will not make mistakes. I said very early on that the equality impact assessments are quite a difficult tool, because you try to capture all the data that you think will have an effect, but you do not always get it. It is not because we do not want to; it is because we genuinely missed it. It is an awkward tool. I do not believe that any of my colleagues would ever intentionally make a decision that would have a detrimental impact on the most vulnerable. However, sometimes, the decisions that we make are based on such broad considerations. That is why it is important that we have those discussions early on across departments—so that we capture some of the issues that we think are there. I hope that that is a very honest answer.

[113] **Joyce Watson:** What is the Welsh Government doing to help people with learning disabilities to secure and maintain employment, particularly in the public sector? To what extent will public sector cuts impede attempts to assist people with a learning disability to get

back into work?

[114] **Carl Sargeant:** Employment policy is not devolved to the Assembly, so it is an issue for the Department for Work and Pensions. Some of the recent announcements about supporting vulnerable people and people with disabilities have been concerning. It is not a devolved matter, but, nevertheless, with WAG strategies, we look holistically at the impact on individuals. The Assembly Government's employment and skills strategy, 'Skills That Work for Wales', is an all-age, all-ability approach, so it is hoped that no-one falls through the net. I am not sure whether that is the answer that you were looking for. It is a non-devolved policy, but we test that everyone fits into our decision-making process. However, the specifics of the employment element are non-devolved.

10.30 a.m.

[115] **Ann Jones:** On employment in the public sector, we are being told that there will be unprecedented cuts to budgets and therefore staff will be lost. How will that affect the vulnerable person, given that we have been told that people will have to go back onto the jobseeker's allowance or prove that they are actively looking for work? Where does that vulnerable person fit in, because I can see that there is a big net, but there are also holes in that net, which these vulnerable people will fall through. First, they will not understand that they may have to reapply to receive the jobseekers' allowance. Secondly, they will not understand that they must actively seek work, and some of them may not be able to seek work actively without that support. How can we in the Assembly help to stitch up the holes in that net?

[116] **Carl Sargeant:** That is really difficult, which I find extremely challenging. We are already seeing a displacement of people across Wales. In the past two weeks, I have visited a few citizens' advice bureaux that have had a higher level of vulnerable people directed to their service. However, that sector is also not immune from the cuts—Citizens Advice has received a 12 per cent cut in its budget recently, which is of concern. So, there is more demand for the service provided, but a reduced budget. That is not going to change; it is a fact that there is a difficult time ahead for budgets. I cannot fill the gap and WAG cannot fill the gap caused by changes in budgets at the Westminster end, and we cannot pick up the pieces at this end. That is not playing politics; it is just reality. You cannot take finances from one pot and suddenly drop them off in another, and we have explained that in relation to our portfolios.

[117] As Minister, with my broader remit to provide support via the benefits that we can deal with, such as council tax benefit, we are trying to ensure easy access for people, or at least ensure that people know the support is there. We have set up information lines in councils, for instance. So, we are trying to ensure that people know that there is something for them if they were to go down that route. This is not easy, however, and I accept that there will be some huge challenges for those who could fall through the net. We must try to build capacity in our system with the funding that we have, although I am not convinced that we can. There is a problem there that will potentially get bigger.

[118] **Ann Jones:** Is that in conflict with our single equality action plan? We are trying to make everyone equal, so could we be challenged legally if we publish the single equality action plan and yet we are unable to support those people?

[119] **Carl Sargeant:** That is not our intention or anyone else's. It is a capacity issue. It is not just about vulnerable people or people with disabilities but is much broader than that. It is about any person finding themselves in a vulnerable position because of their circumstances, whether financial or otherwise. So, have we got the capacity to support people, whoever they are, which I think was your question? It is under pressure and increasingly so. I am being



honest with you, as I do not know whether we can fill the gap. That is not just a problem for me and my department, but also for other departments. As I said earlier, if you take something away from one end, you should not automatically think that someone has a fix at the other end, because they do not, particularly around finance. So, if there is a reduction in funding at one end of the M4, we cannot pick up the pieces at this end. That is not playing politics; that is just fact.

[120] **Ann Jones:** Sorry, Joyce. I interrupted then.

[121] **Joyce Watson:** My questions are on monitoring and reviewing the scheme. You say in your paper that a delivery group has been established with external and internal representatives to inform and develop the scheme and to review progress. It has met twice: in November 2009 and June 2010. Could you give an example of how the information from that delivery group review meeting has been used to inform changes to policy or practice?

[122] **Carl Sargeant:** Ministerial advisory groups and delivery groups are all very well, provided that they give you information. It is great to set up a committee of people, but they have to be useful. To be honest, when I came into post in December, I was clear to my advisory groups and committees that if they were to remain in existence, they had to be useful—not just for me, but for the broader spectrum of activity. So, I have been quite robust on that.

[123] This group has been useful. The delivery group has met twice, in November 2009 and June 2010, and some of the discussion was about a report on progress across the department. That helped me to understand what was being done, how, and by whom. It also informed the monitoring and implementation of the single equality scheme. An important aspect of the debate was to challenge the existing processes. I spoke at a conference yesterday about scrutiny—and I think that Ann did as well, actually. I am not going off track, because I am talking about challenging decisions, as we get a better outcome if we challenge the reasons why we do things. When I come before committee like this, your questions are useful to me as they show how we could change policy, should we have to. The delivery group has been doing that as well—helping to inform developments with future planning work. You will hear about some of that work later today, when I make a statement in Plenary. It is about the group informing change on policy, and that is working. I feel that it is working, anyway.

[124] **Ms Lambert:** I have been involved in only one of the delivery groups since I have been in post, and they are very much like a critical friend—they provide that challenge. Our most recent reporting was presented to the delivery group with a departmental focus. Based on the group's input, we then developed the work with a thematic focus, which was educational from an operational point of view. So, the groups are very much like a critical friend, providing the challenge that is critical to the process.

[125] **Ann Jones:** Is everyone happy? I asked you about monitoring earlier, and you confirmed that you are monitoring, and are able to track progress. Does anyone have any more questions? I see not.

[126] Thank you for coming to committee today, Minister. It was like having you back as a member. You have more than earned your brownie points, so we will not have you back for some time. I think that we are due to have you back to talk about budgeting later on in the process.

[127] **Carl Sargeant:** Participatory budgets—I cannot even say it.

[128] **Ann Jones:** Yes, thank you very much, and thanks to Gill as well. That brings our meeting to a close. I will just remind Members that we have an informal briefing on gender

budgeting tomorrow at 11.45 a.m. in dining room 2, and then our next formal meeting will be on 5 October, when we will tackle gender budgeting, which is our next subject. Without further ado, I declare the meeting closed.

*Daeth y cyfarfod i ben am 10.39 a.m.*  
*The meeting ended at 10.39 a.m.*