



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

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

**Dydd Iau , 6 Tachwedd 2008
Thursday, 6 November 2008**

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Procedural Motion

Cofnodir y trafodion hyn yn yr iaith y llefarwyd hwy ynddi yn y pwyllgor. Yn ogystal, cynhwysir cyfieithiad Saesneg o gyfraniadau yn y Gymraeg. Mae hon yn fersiwn ddrafft o'r cofnod. Cyhoeddir fersiwn derfynol ymhen pum diwrnod gwaith.

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. This is a draft version of the record. The final version will be published within five working days.

Aelodau'r pwyllgor yn bresennol
Committee members in attendance

Eleanor Burnham	Democratiaid Rhyddfrydol Cymru Welsh Liberal Democrats
Bethan Jenkins	Plaid Cymru The Party of Wales
Nick Ramsay	Ceidwadwyr Cymreig Welsh Conservatives
Joyce Watson	Llafur Labour

Eraill yn bresennol
Others in attendance

Steve Chamberlain	Yr Is-adran Cyllid Llywodraeth Leol, Llywodraeth Cynulliad Cymru Local Government Finance Division, The Welsh Assembly Government
Frank Cuthbert	Yr Is-adran Polisi Llywodraeth Leol, Llywodraeth Cynulliad Cymru Local Government Policy Division, The Welsh Assembly Government
Brian Gibbons	Aelod Cynulliad, Llafur (Y Gweinidog dros Gyfiawnder Cymdeithasol a Llywodraeth Leol) Assembly Member, Labour (The Minister for Social Justice and Local Government)
Kay Jenkins	Pennaeth Comisiwn Etholiadol Cymru Head of Electoral Commission Wales
Phil Johnson	Is Gadeirydd, Cymdeithas y Gweinyddwyr Etholiadol yng Nghymru Vice Chair, Association of Electoral Administrators in Wales
Bob Screen	Cadeirydd, Cymdeithas y Gweinyddwyr Etholiadol yng Nghymru Chair, Association of Electoral Administrators in Wales
Ian Skinner	Pennaeth Cyllid Cyfalaf Cyllid Llywodraeth Leol Head of Local Government Finance Capital Funding

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

Tom Jackson	Clerc Clerk
Rita Phillips	Dirprwy Glerc Deputy Clerk

Dechreuodd y cyfarfod am 9.30 a.m.
The meeting began at 9.30 a.m.

Ethol Cadeirydd Dros Dro
Election of Temporary Chair

[1] **Mr Jackson:** Good morning and welcome to the Committee on Equality of

Opportunity. Unfortunately, Ann Jones, the committee chair, is unable to be here today. Therefore, under Standing Order No. 10.19, I call for nominations for a temporary chair.

[2] **Bethan Jenkins:** I nominate Joyce Watson.

[3] **Eleanor Burnham:** I second that.

[4] **Mr Jackson:** Joyce Watson has been nominated. Is everyone happy for Joyce to chair this meeting? I see that you are.

*Penodwyd Joyce Watson yn gadeirydd dros dro.
Joyce Watson was appointed temporary chair.*

9.30 a.m.

Cyflwyniad, Ymddiheuriadau a Dirprwyon Introduction, Apologies and Substitutions

[5] **Joyce Watson:** Good morning. I welcome everyone to committee this morning, particularly Dr Brian Gibbons, Steve Chamberlain and Ian Skinner.

[6] Translation is available on channel 1 of your headsets and the verbatim feed is available on channel 0. We are not expecting a fire drill, so, if the alarm should sound, we will take our directions from the ushers, who will also assist the public with any problems that they might have with their headsets. If Members have difficulties with their microphones, please let the deputy clerk know.

[7] I ask everyone around the table to switch off their mobile phones, pagers, BlackBerrys and anything else that may affect the sound system. Again, if the fire alarm sounds, you should follow the instructions of the ushers. The assembly point is in front of the building by the car park. I remind everyone around the table not to touch the buttons on their microphones and to wait until the red light comes on before they begin to speak.

[8] I have received apologies from Ann Jones and I am not aware of any substitutions. If there are any declarations of interest, please make them. I see that there are none.

9.32 a.m.

Y Diweddaraŵ ar Gyflogau Cyfartal Equal Pay Update

[9] **Joyce Watson:** Do you have a statement to make on this, Minister?

[10] **The Minister for Social Justice and Local Government (Brian Gibbons):** No. Hopefully, the paper will speak for itself. Since the last meeting, we have been able to make progress on a number of actions, which, I hope, will please the committee.

[11] **Joyce Watson:** Thank you. I will kick off with the first question. In what way do you think that the Assembly Government can contribute effectively to the speedy resolution of the equal pay claims being dealt with by local authorities?

[12] **Brian Gibbons:** Clearly, we have a role as an exemplar in being a good employer and we have made a fair amount of progress in this regard internally. On resolving the equal pay issue in local government, it is important to recognise and acknowledge that local

authorities are primarily responsible for this. They are the employer; they have their own statutory duties in relation to equality issues and equality of pay, so the responsibility first and foremost lies with local authorities. We realise that, in some instances, local authorities may need assistance, particularly with back pay and we are willing to consider applications for directions for capitalisation from local authorities to allow them to meet any back pay bill.

[13] Similarly, local authorities have a duty to move forward to institute a single-status payments system for their staff. Again, we have put a considerable amount of money into the revenue support grant over the last three to four years to facilitate that.

[14] **Eleanor Burnham:** I note that the north Wales local authorities mentioned in the first paragraph are Anglesey, Conwy, Denbighshire and Flintshire. Does that mean that—

[15] **Brian Gibbons:** Sorry, where are you?

[16] **Eleanor Burnham:** We have a paper.

[17] **Brian Gibbons:** From whom? From us?

[18] **Eleanor Burnham:** It is from the Members' research service.

[19] **Brian Gibbons:** I do not see that paper.

[20] **Eleanor Burnham:** I beg your pardon. The first paragraph of the paper relates to further progress made in settling equal pay claims in local government. It contains a list of local authorities that are engaged in this procedure and of claims outstanding. I do not see any mention of Anglesey, Conwy, Denbighshire and Flintshire. What is their status at the moment? How satisfied are you with the pace of settling claims? Although you have just said that you have pumped money into local government for this procedure, I presume that there would still be some disputes between you and possibly the Welsh Local Government Association or local authorities regarding whether they have sufficient resources to complete this process satisfactorily.

[21] **Brian Gibbons:** We understand that something like seven authorities have either settled their back pay or are very much in the process of doing so in that they are entering the endgame if they have not yet sorted out their back pay. The view of a number of local authorities is that have no liability at all, and they are willing to defend that view if challenged. We think that perhaps another half dozen local authorities feel that they are on track to resolve the issue by the end of this financial year, with two more authorities committed to complete the process next year.

[22] From my meetings with local authority representatives, I think that they recognise that this has to be an important front-line issue for them. It was an issue that I mentioned in my speech to the WLGA conference in Llandudno this year. I hope that the series of events that we are organising in conjunction with the Wales TUC and the Equality and Human Rights Commission will give a new sense of dynamism to resolve this matter as well as provide reassurance to some local authorities in this regard, and maybe even for some trade unions.

[23] As you see from the paper, one of the points that we will emphasise to local authorities is that not only is there a legal requirement, as well as the requirement in terms of social justice, equally, there is a strong business case for promoting equal pay. By operating at those three levels, it is hoped that local authorities will recognise their duty. They need to remember that, if they do not resolve this issue, they are vulnerable in the courts, because equal pay has been a statutory duty going back to 1970. The more that local authorities drag

their feet in this regard, if that is what they are doing, the more exposed they are to finding themselves in court with the judgments going against them.

[24] **Eleanor Burnham:** Have there been any further requests from local authorities for extra moneys in the form of capitalisation and so on? I am aware of very complicated and prolonged cases in the north-east of England. Are you sure that none of those issues are affecting Wales?

[25] **Brian Gibbons:** We cannot be sure of that. In part, some of the findings from those court cases may have made the trade unions more cautious in endorsing any equal pay settlement. Potentially, some of the legal findings may close off some the options that local authorities might have thought they had to smooth the transition towards equal pay.

9.40 a.m.

[26] So, the judges who made those rulings are saying that this is the law of the land, so we must live with that. However, from a pragmatic point of view on whether it helps or hinders the move towards equal pay, it would be fair to say that it probably does not help.

[27] **Bethan Jenkins:** Your report mentions that you may be able to get some powers similar to Scotland as part of the new raft equality Bill. Can you expand on what that would entail in terms of specific responsibilities for Welsh Ministers?

[28] In Wales, we are doing better at closing the pay gap—I think that the figure is 10 per cent. Do you have any targets for decreasing that? The fact that we are doing better does not mean that we can relax. How is the Government taking the campaign forward with other organisations?

[29] **Brian Gibbons:** The target must be zero—there cannot be any other legitimate target in this respect. Some of the issues in relation to equal pay and getting to zero are about the segregation of work opportunities. We know that a number of occupations are gender-dominated; low-paid cleaning jobs, for example, are predominantly done by women. Men may have predominance in certain other occupations which may be more highly paid. A great deal of work is ongoing in schools and in agencies such as Careers Wales to promote this campaign and to challenge these stereotypes. For example, 3 per cent of the fire service is made up of women, which cannot be justified, but that is where we are. If we do not challenge gender stereotypes in terms of occupational opportunity and training, there will continue to be a residual pay gap. So, that must be part of the campaign.

[30] The events that we are proposing for next year are not just for public sector employers, because we would like to see private sector employers coming along and selling the message that it is good for business. If they can engage with and value their female employees—we know that the educational achievement of young women is considerably better than that of young men—there must be a strong business case to allow women equality of opportunity and to promote it through the pay system. So, there is a great deal that we can do.

[31] Moving on to the Scottish issue, we had the opportunity—you will not remember this, because you were not then a Members—to have gender equality in the previous Assembly, but, particularly as Members were not happy in relation to pay, that particular proposal was rejected. So, we have gone back to Westminster and asked the UK Government, through the draft equality Bill, to give us powers to impose a range of equality duties on public bodies in Wales. You will remember that it was just the three strands previously, namely race, disability and gender, but the equalities agenda has broadened out to six or seven potential threads. Therefore, there will be equality duties in that regard, but we are particularly keen to have

legislative competence in relation to duties with regard to gender equalities that we do not have currently. Organisations have schemes, but there is no legal duty.

[32] **Bethan Jenkins:** Thank you. Coming back to what you said about Careers Wales and encouraging women to apply for jobs in which they would not normally be employed, I know that it is not your responsibility, but with regard to the Green Paper on welfare reform and the credit crisis, there is talk that workers' flexibility, which women take much more note of, might be threatened by the Green Paper, particularly with lone parents being forced back to work. Can you make representations in your capacity as the Minister with responsibility for social justice to ensure that that is not targeted negatively, because that would mean that women would not be able to access the job market as they would normally?

[33] **Brian Gibbons:** It is important that any assessment of people's capacity to engage with the world of work is reasonable and that a rigid and dogmatic line should not be taken on that. However, there is an encouraging range of additional support for women in the UK Government's proposals. It is fair to say that, although tremendous progress has been made in getting women, particularly lone parents, into work, not enough has been done, and the incentives to allow lone parents in particular to get into work have not been sufficient. The welfare reform proposals would provide considerably more support for women, and for lone parents in particular. So, there is a tremendous amount that is good in those proposals. However, if people rigidly impose those requirements and do not take individual circumstances and, in some instances, local circumstances, into account, there is no doubt that many people will find themselves in greater hardship than they are in at the moment.

[34] The type of issues that I am talking about, particularly for lone parents, include the fact that there must be good childcare provision in a particular locality. There is no point in waving a big stick and threatening people by making their benefits conditional on getting into training or work if there is no adequate local childcare of sufficient quality to enhance the life experience of children. However, if those safeguards are in place, what the Government is proposing is positive and we should all be working for it. We know from the Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development report, and several other reports, that the group most vulnerable to poverty and marginalisation is lone parents. That situation must not be tolerated. We cannot sit on our hands and say that it is good enough that lone parents can be left on benefits. That is not good for them, their children or their communities. The welfare proposals are a serious attempt to address that.

[35] **Nick Ramsay:** I was not a Member in the last Assembly either, so be gentle with me, Minister. Can you elaborate a little further on the capitalisation direction that is outlined in the paper? A number of authorities are taking you up on that. Have you received any further requests and how do you see that panning out? Is it working for those authorities and is there sufficient support available for them?

[36] **Brian Gibbons:** Four authorities have approached us for capitalisation this year. Three are authorities that have already settled, but needed a little more cover, and one is a fresh applicant from square one. The closing date was mid September, so the bids for this year are closed, and we have gone as far as we can in that regard, but next year is another year. Colleagues may have picked up from other committees that we know that local authorities are sitting on considerable reserves of about £350 million, and they are 'earmarked' reserves, which, in some instances, include contingencies for an equal pay settlement. Responsible local authorities are making their own contingency plans, and the message that I am getting from several authorities is that they may be able to resolve back pay issues without having to resort to capitalisation.

9.50 a.m.

[37] **Eleanor Burnham:** I suspect that that is okay until they have some major crisis, such as a flood. What Welsh provisions are likely to be in the draft equality Bill and how, do you think, a new equality Act will contribute to making equal pay a reality in Wales?

[38] **Brian Gibbons:** Going back to Bethan's point, one interesting thing in the Bill is the new focus on private employers. In fairness, we have spent a fair amount of time on this in the public sector, and the national health service has gone a considerable way towards achieving equal pay through 'Agenda for Change'. Progress is also being made in local government, but the private sector, in many regards, is still an issue. A number of the proposals that are in the draft equality Bill will cover the private sector. First, from the point of view of equal pay, there cannot be any secrecy in relation to what people are being paid, because that has been regarded as a big obstacle to progress. It is difficult to argue for equal pay if you do not know what other people in your organisation are being paid. Secondly, Harriet Harman, the UK Minister, has laid down the challenge to shareholders and boards of private companies to report on what they are doing on the general equalities agenda, which has to be as important to the shareholders as the profit and loss of the company. So, it is a major commitment by the Westminster Government to change the terrain on which the equalities debate takes place.

[39] **Eleanor Burnham:** The very last issue that I want to raise, with the Chair's indulgence, is about the medical profession. There are such grades in hospitals as medical associates, I think—and I know that you will be very familiar with that, Minister.

[40] **Brian Gibbons:** I used to be.

[41] **Eleanor Burnham:** These grades are often taken up by women because of the flexibility that they afford to move in and out of a career. What are you doing to ensure that women in the medical profession are getting their fair share of pay? Perhaps you could provide a written answer.

[42] **Brian Gibbons:** I think that you might have to write to the Minister for Health and Social Services. The salary scale in the national health service is a standard, single-status payment spine. So, once you are on the spine, there really is no discrimination. You said that women are more likely to take up roles as assistants, but are you talking about general practice, which is self-employment, or hospital-based careers?

[43] **Eleanor Burnham:** I was talking about hospitals and about a particular grade that I came across when investigating a constituency question, called 'associate consultant'. Apparently, some hospitals have ensured that women are put in this grade, which is lower than a consultant grade. I just wondered—

[44] **Brian Gibbons:** If that policy is being operated as you describe, that is legally challengeable. I would certainly need to get more information before I adjudicate in any individual case.

[45] **Joyce Watson:** I would like to thank the Minister, but not before I have asked the last question. We have a paper before us that outlines those local authorities that seem to be taking this issue quite seriously, namely Blaenau Gwent, Cardiff, Gwynedd, Merthyr Tydfil, Neath Port Talbot, Swansea and Torfaen. As someone who represents the Mid and West Wales region, it is worrying that the authorities in my area do not appear in that list.

[46] Secondly, I note that some authorities say that they have a good chance of defending their current arrangements. That is of concern to me, and I have no doubt that it will concern people in that region—and I focus on my region—because, very often, the local authority is the largest employer in an area. It seems to be an odd way to go about spending public

money, defending your position in the courtroom, rather than paying the people whom you employ. What is your opinion on that? I am concerned about public money being spent in that way rather than its being spent paying people their due for an honest day's work, given that that would, in turn, be reinvested in the local economy.

[47] Finally, on those authorities that have awarded equal pay to staff—and I mentioned a few of them—have we looked at whether there has been an impact on the local economy of the area as a consequence? If not, do you think that we could look at the possible impact on the local economy of the areas where that money is being spent?

[48] **Brian Gibbons:** I do not think that we have looked at that, but perhaps the business case will look at that.

[49] **Mr Chamberlain:** Yes, it will. Among the actions that we have agreed with the Wales TUC and the Equality and Human Rights Commission in Wales is the development of a business case, so they will be looking at that. They are commissioning that work at the moment and so, hopefully, it will be ready for the equal pay conference that we are hosting on 11 March, when the business case for implementing effective equal pay policy will be set out, and that will look at the impact on the local economy.

[50] **Brian Gibbons:** On the first part of the question, if local authorities are being perverse and are saying that they do not have an equal pay liability when they know in their heart of hearts that they do, everything that you say is legitimate. If they know in their heart of hearts that they have a liability, the priority is for them to try to sort it out, because, eventually, the day of reckoning will come, and the longer they leave it, the bigger the bill will be and the more likely they are of being exposed—and that is apart from the court costs that you mentioned, Joyce.

[51] However, some local authorities genuinely believe that they do not have a liability. The main basis of many equal pay claims are the differential bonus systems that operated in the past, and some authorities do not have any linear responsibility for preceding authorities, so they do not have that liability. Some of them insist that the bonus schemes that were in operation were, in their view, and that of their legal advisers, fair and could not be deemed to be discriminatory. If those local authorities genuinely feel that they do not have a case to answer, their stewardship of public money requires them to ensure that the money is spent on front-line services, rather than on giving spurious—and I use that word cautiously—equal pay settlements. If there is no liability, they should not be making equal pay settlements. The purpose of the money is to deliver services to the public, and it is not right that that money be diverted from delivering public services if there is no liability. I am not in a position to judge the merits of individual local authorities' cases, but a smallish minority are fairly clear that they do not have a liability and are proceeding on that basis.

[52] **Joyce Watson:** Thank you, Minister. Could you give us a further breakdown of those authorities who do not think that they have a liability, or are you unable to do that?

[53] **Brian Gibbons:** At this stage, those local authorities would be reluctant for me to do that, because I suspect that all local authorities have cases pending, and would be nervous about that at this juncture.

[54] **Joyce Watson:** Thank you. I draw this session to a close. I thank Steve Chamberlain and Ian Skinner now, as they may not be staying for the next session. However, you are welcome to stay if you want to, so feel free.

10.00 a.m.

**Adroddiad ar Hygyrchedd Canolfannau Pleidleisio yng Nghymru—y
Diweddaraf
Report on Accessibility of Polling Stations in Wales—An Update**

[55] **Joyce Watson:** I remind committee members that this item has been scheduled to revisit the issue of the accessibility of polling stations in Wales following the committee's report of December 2002—sorry, I mean December 2007. I am not sure why I suddenly leaped back five years. Perhaps I was trying to seem younger. I invite the Minister to give a brief introduction before Members ask questions.

[56] **The Minister for Social Justice and Local Government (Brian Gibbons):** It is fair to say that this committee and its predecessors have paid particular attention to this issue, and your scrutiny of this subject and the importance that you have attached to it have been significant contributory factors to the progress made. The fact that your spotlight was cast on this particular issue has pushed it up the agenda. The relevant regulatory bodies, and indeed the electoral returning officers, are now more aware of their responsibilities in this regard.

[57] Members may have seen the report of the Electoral Commission on May's local government elections. Although particular issues were highlighted, the headline message was that we were moving steadily forward in a positive way. The inspection report did not give any examples of a serious dereliction of the duty to facilitate access to polling stations, although there were some irritants and nuisances that should have been properly addressed. Substantially, it was a good-news story.

[58] We commissioned CRG Research Ltd to seek ways of moving forward on a number of recommendations from previous committee reports. The company visited five and a half authorities, as it put it, and felt that the good work of this committee and its predecessor, linked to the work of the Electoral Commission, had led to a greater sense of urgency in addressing this issue. Looking at both documents, the single biggest issue that remains is the consistent training of staff. In many respects, much of the hardware, and so on, is in place; it is just a case of ensuring that that consistency of practice is established for future elections.

[59] **Joyce Watson:** As temporary Chair, it is only right and proper for me to thank Ann Jones and the members of her committee, who have done tremendous work. They have been very consistent in their approach to this and very diligent in watching, year after year, what has happened, and in progressing this agenda as far as it has gone. Without the due diligence and commitment of Ann and the committee members, I do not think that we would be where we are. I want to put that on record as an acting Chair.

[60] I will ask the first question. I have read the report. What actions will the Welsh Assembly Government take as a result of the report on the local government elections in 2008, which it requested from the Electoral Commission? Will specific actions be taken?

[61] **Brian Gibbons:** Which report do you have before you now? Is it the Electoral Commission report?

[62] **Joyce Watson:** Yes.

[63] **Brian Gibbons:** I think that most of the work now taking place is carried out through the elections planning group. The two big things that I take from the various reports are, as I have already said, training and education, and making sure that that consistency is there. We have also indicated that we are willing to work with organisations such as Scope. If it wants to do some further survey work during future elections, we would be willing to work with Scope to provide that assurance. Previously, I think that it has more or less done the work off

its own bat, or in conjunction with other organisations, and we have not been directly involved. I suppose that some of the survey work has been a bit hit and miss—in fairness to the Scope surveys—but, nonetheless, the surveys have been an important catalyst in driving change in this regard. Do you want to add anything, Frank, in terms of immediate actions for the future?

[64] **Mr Cuthbert:** It is true that we have informed Scope of our willingness to assist in its surveys. We do not know why it chose not to conduct its normal Polls Apart survey at the local elections. I think that Scope has been trying to move towards a system of working jointly with returning officers and electoral administrators on improving accessibility, rather than being an informal inspectoral regime, because, on occasions, that has led to difficult relations between Scope and the electoral administrators. Nevertheless, I do not think that it is abandoning the polls; I suspect that it will return to them for the general election, when it comes, and probably for our next elections. Its findings are useful in pointing out particular weaknesses. The other thing that we are hoping to do is to continue to fund—budget allowing—the adaptations to polling stations for the next Assembly elections, as those are the only elections for which we can provide funding. Working with the Electoral Commission, which I know that you will be hearing from later, we will ensure that the guidance that it gives to returning officers is up to scratch, in terms of accessibility issues, and that that is reflected in the training for returning officers and their staff, which, again, we help to fund in the case of Assembly elections.

[65] **Eleanor Burnham:** When I was first a candidate I remember that I rushed around to all the polling stations in the local authority area, because I wanted to see the facilities and where they all were. The one thing that struck me straight away was that some of them were in the most appalling physical situation—not condition, but situation. I will never forget that one was on a very nasty corner and I thought to myself that an able-bodied person could not get there or park there, and might be knocked down as they crossed the road.

10.10 a.m.

[66] I wondered about the training; one of the issues for me is the way in which local access groups can feed in. What progress is being made through the elections planning group about the awareness that local authorities must surely have through these local access groups so that they can get involved, because local people know best what is available. I always think, ‘What a stupid place to have a polling station’. For disabled people, it is obviously far worse. I hope that they will take the advice of the local access groups.

[67] **Brian Gibbons:** You would certainly hope that they would be doing that. I think that it was called the elections administration Act, was it not?

[68] **Mr Cuthbert:** It was the Electoral Administration Act 2006.

[69] **Brian Gibbons:** It required the location of all polling stations to be reviewed and for that to happen every four years. My understanding is that that has made a substantial difference to the location of polling stations. I do not think that there have been many appeals—if that is the right word—against the decisions that flowed from that review. We have to recognise that, maybe, in some communities, the only public building is not totally fit for purpose from a disability point of view and it may not be possible to put a demountable building there to rectify that. However, from what the Electoral Commission has said, those cases are few and far between. We would not say that the situation is perfect, but, following the review of the location of the polling stations, the problems have been cut back quite considerably.

[70] **Mr Cuthbert:** I know that the Electoral Commission urges returning officers to link

up with their local access groups when reviewing their polling places. The first time that that review process was enforced on returning officers was in 2007. I will not repeat the Minister's words, but we are not aware of any complaints resulting from that review. There is a gradual process of improvement of locations, but, as I am sure the Association of Electoral Administrators in Wales will tell you later, in some parts of Wales, the geography makes it difficult to deal with accessibility issues because of hills, and because of the limited numbers of public buildings in some parts of Wales, particularly urban valley areas.

[71] **Bethan Jenkins:** You noted earlier that Scope had not carried out a survey this year. One of our recommendations in the previous report was that the Government should help with funding surveys of this kind. The Equality and Human Rights Commission has said that it was not aware of any problems, because Scope did not take part in that process. You said that you were not aware of problems; what efforts did you make to contact Scope to find out whether it would be taking part in this survey? What discussions will you have with it to ensure that it happens in the future? Without such monitoring processes, it will be hard for us to find out what is affecting disabled people on the ground, apart from having sporadic evidence here and there.

[72] Gofal Cymru launched its report on Tuesday night. One of the elements that it raised was discrimination with regard to taking part in the electoral process. What work are you doing with the Minister for Health and Social Services to take away that stigma so that people with mental health problems can feel that they can access the system freely and fairly?

[73] **Brian Gibbons:** I will ask Frank to deal with the particulars. The methodology used by Scope could be open to criticism. I do not think that it would have defended something that you would get a PhD or an MA for as a piece of research. Nonetheless, I am not trying to shy away from some of the conclusions, which, as Frank said, have been important drivers in recognising the need for change. If Scope had not undertaken its work, we probably would not be as far forward as we are today. I would like to make that point. However, in working with Scope, it is important to ensure that the methodology is a little bit more robust. I do not know whether Frank would agree, but, looking at the methodology, the way that it was getting feedback was by inviting people to give it the bad news and not counterbalancing it with the good experiences. As I said, that may be unfair. However, if that was the approach that was generally being operated, then you will not get the full picture that you would need. Frank, could you deal with the specifics regarding what we have done to approach Scope?

[74] **Mr Cuthbert:** Yes. The organisation of the Polls Apart surveys in Wales revolves around a fairly small nucleus. Scope has an agreement with an organisation called The Pollen Shop, which conducts the survey on its behalf and is run by a man called Gwilym, whose surname escapes me at the moment—I think that his e-mail address is gwilym@thepollenshop, and, whenever I meet him, I just call him Gwilym. I had a number of e-mail exchanges with him in which I made it clear that the Minister had said that he would like to support these surveys. That was last year. Gwilym then told me that they were not proposing to do the survey on this occasion. That is it, really, in terms of the contact there. However, Gwilym is clear that there is an ongoing message of support from the Assembly Government, and, when the general election is called, we will repeat that offer and we will also do that for the European elections should it carry out a survey next year.

[75] The issue of mental health and discrimination did surface at the Assembly elections in 2003 or the local elections of 2004; it was one or the other. In Denbighshire, there was a case where a voter who had Down's syndrome, but who was nevertheless registered, was refused a vote on the basis that he appeared incapable of voting. That gained a lot of publicity at the time, although we had no direct involvement in it. However, the Electoral Commission reported upon it and was critical of Denbighshire's approach. It made it clear that the individual should have been able to vote. I am scraping the barrel of my technical knowledge

on this, but I remember that the Electoral Administration Act 2006 broadened the number of people with mental illness or a disability of some sort who would be entitled to vote. In other words, it reduced the limitation on their ability to vote, so that the default position is that, more or less, all people in those categories can now vote and should be enabled to vote.

10.20 a.m.

[76] However, on what we have done about that, the planning group has not specifically addressed this issue. To divert slightly, we have recently addressed the issue of deaf people and their access to the polling system. We had a presentation from one of their spokespersons, which was very good, but, at the end of that, he made it clear that access to polling stations or to the voting system was less of a problem than was engaging in the democratic process itself. However, that issue needs to be addressed with the various agencies involved in the polling process.

[77] **Bethan Jenkins:** To come back briefly, you mentioned initiating dialogue with organisations involved in the mental health sector, but if you are currently not speaking to them as part of the steering group, then I have concerns about that. They have raised such concerns with me.

[78] **Brian Gibbons:** I am not sure whether you are referring to the slightly wider issue of the participation by people with mental health problems in the wider democratic process. We have established an expert group on improving participation in local government, particularly for councillors and so on. I am not party to that group's day-to-day deliberations, but it is due to report in January or February. Perhaps we could draw its attention to the point that Bethan has raised, that in promoting diversity among the people coming forward to take part in elections, there is a perception that people with mental health problems are finding this difficult and that the group should consider that. I am sure that it will look at other minority or disadvantaged groups. It is important for it to have a view on this given that around 20 to 30 per cent of the population is prone to mental health problems at some stage in their lives, so it is a significant minority of the population.

[79] **Mr Cuthbert:** I can arrange to raise this with the co-ordinator of the expert panel, which is nearing the end of its work. However, it has at least two meetings left. We can also place that on the agenda of a planning group meeting in the new year. We could invite an expert along in the same way as we did for the deaf and hearing-disabled category.

[80] **Joyce Watson:** Could we have an update on the outcome of that? That would be useful.

[81] **Nick Ramsay:** I have a couple of questions. On that last point, Frank Cuthbert mentioned the expert panel. Is that the same as the expert group? Are you both talking about the same thing?

[82] **Brian Gibbons:** Yes. We are talking about what I think is called the Councillors Commission.

[83] **Mr Cuthbert:** The group looks generally at encouraging greater participation in local government. I think that the full name is the expert panel on the Councillors Commission's recommendations for Wales.

[84] **Brian Gibbons:** The purpose of that is to secure greater involvement of the public in standing for election, to ensure that councillors are more valued, and to facilitate a way of making councillors more typical of their community—although not necessarily more representative, because any elected member must strive to represent their constituents

regardless of their political affiliations or anything else. However, it works to make the councillors more typical of their community and generally to see what else can be done to encourage the level of participation.

[85] **Joyce Watson:** Did you have another question, Nick?

[86] **Nick Ramsay:** Yes. Did you say that a report will be published in January? Is that the date that you mentioned?

[87] **Brian Gibbons:** No, it will be a little bit later than January. The expert group is due to report in the spring.

[88] **Nick Ramsay:** It would be useful, Chair, if we could have an update on that at some point in the year.

[89] **Mr Cuthbert:** Given the membership of the panel, one of the panellists was previously a political correspondent for the *South Wales Echo*, so—

[90] **Brian Gibbons:** So, there you are, it is leak proof.

[91] **Eleanor Burnham:** Could I just ask, Chair, for the expert group's full name? I did not quite catch it. You said it was the expert panel of something or other of something or other.

[92] **Mr Cuthbert:** Yes, I got it the wrong way around; it is the Councillors Commission—Expert Panel for Wales. It is looking at the recommendations of the Councillors Commission, which was an England-based body that brought out a very full report for the Department of Communities and Local Government in England on encouraging greater participation. The panel is looking at the applicability of the recommendations to Wales and any related issues.

[93] **Eleanor Burnham:** Was the appointment of these worthy people—as I am sure that they are—open to scrutiny under public appointments rules, such as the Nolan rules? Are these Welsh people in Wales or is this a UK body?

[94] **Mr Cuthbert:** It is a temporary unpaid body that we set up with the Minister's approval and I would be very happy to provide a list of its members.

[95] **Eleanor Burnham:** That is very kind of you. In this era of openness and transparency, when we are expected to know what is going on, it would be quite useful to know about these august and worthy people.

[96] **Joyce Watson:** I will ask the final question. What work has been undertaken by the Welsh Assembly Government, through the elections planning group, with the Equality and Human Rights Commission to encourage local authorities to provide details of actions being taken to improve accessibility to polling stations in their disability and equality scheme action plans?

[97] **Brian Gibbons:** Again, I will look to Frank to give you chapter and verse. I think that it is said at some stage in the CRG Research Ltd report that the authors were not totally convinced of the value of reporting. Many local authorities receive reports from polling station staff post elections; however, there is no appetite for an enforced requirement for problems experienced at polling stations to be documented. Underlying that is the fact that the number of complaints is not particularly large and, in response, you may be setting up a level of bureaucracy that is not in proportion with the scale of the problem. That is the way that I

read it. I do not know whether Frank has any further observations to make on that. It is on page 46, in the conclusion of the report.

[98] **Mr Cuthbert:** The main mechanism that local authorities now have to report on their standard of accessibility is through the newly established performance standards, which the Electoral Commission introduced for the conduct of elections. The data will have been collected for the first time this year and, no doubt, Kay Jenkins would be able to tell you something about that. CRG felt, in the main, that the point that you raised in your question would be better directed to it as it has the primary function of ensuring that returning officers conduct their duties in a proper fashion. The planning group has taken a view to endorse that to encourage input to the discussions around the performance standards, and to encourage a full response by all local authorities in Wales to the need for them to provide the data required for the Electoral Commission.

10.30 a.m.

[99] **Joyce Watson:** Thank you. I will draw this part of the proceedings to a close, because I want to keep to time. I thank the Minister for attending, and I thank Frank Cuthbert for his help this morning.

[100] While we wait for our next witnesses to arrive, under Standing Order No. 10.25, I propose that we adjourn the meeting for two minutes.

*Gohiriwyd y cyfarfod rhwng 10.32 a.m. a 10.34 a.m.
The meeting adjourned between 10.32 a.m. and 10.34 a.m.*

[101] **Joyce Watson:** I welcome to the meeting Kay Jenkins, head of the Electoral Commission Wales, Phil Johnson, the vice chair of the Association of Electoral Administrators in Wales—that is quite a mouthful—and Bob Screen, chair of the Association of Electoral Administrators in Wales. I invite the presenters to introduce themselves briefly, after which Members will ask questions.

[102] **Ms Jenkins:** As Joyce said, I am Kay Jenkins, head of the Wales office of the Electoral Commission. Thank you for inviting me; I welcome the opportunity to speak to the committee. I will say only a few words before we move to questions, because I have circulated papers in advance so we do not need to go through those.

[103] To give a quick overview, the commission has been reporting on the accessibility of polling stations in Wales since 2001, and although there have been gradual improvements year on year, over the period of time that we have been reporting the improvements are quite significant compared with, for example, the Assembly elections in 2003. It is no longer the case that we have to push the issue of accessibility with local authorities, because they are now taking positive and conscious steps to improve accessibility as far as our understanding is concerned.

[104] The problems continue at ground level, but they exist in a relative minority of cases. We had observers in 13 authorities across Wales, and the types of problems that they picked up were that some polling stations were in inaccessible locations, which is a difficult issue to address. However, the improvement in the accessibility of public buildings in general has assisted polling stations. I cite an example of one local authority where the returning officer genuinely pointed out to us a couple of difficult polling stations where he was at a loss as to what to do in those areas to find anywhere better. However, at the same time in the same authority, they had set up an induction loop for hearing aid users in every polling station. So, it is a mixed picture in that the problems continue in a minority of cases.

[105] The types of problems that occur are largely fixable in that we provide guidance in our polling station handbooks with a checklist of accessibility issues, but sometimes on the day in that particular polling station, the polling staff might not have approached accessibility in the best way or their signage has fallen down and not been replaced, they have left doors locked and so on. That is partly a training issue. There was a lack of training in some authorities across Wales this year, and that relates to funding. For an Assembly election, European Parliament election and a general election, there is central funding for the training of polling staff. For a local election, the funding comes from the local authority, so it was not provided as comprehensively as it might be for a national election, although some local authorities are doing more briefing and training.

[106] In looking ahead to the European Parliament elections, we will see a step change in improvements. The regional returning officer for Wales, Bryn Parry Jones, has discussed with us and our colleagues the Association of Electoral Administrators the need to get a minimum standard of training for polling station staff. The commission already has a package of training materials ready, and we are looking at working with our colleagues on how those materials can be rolled out effectively to ensure that all polling station staff are trained. It is not just a case of attending the training; it is about the quality of the training given and who does the training. So, we are looking at providing training for trainers. We are already looking at a comprehensive package for the European Parliament elections next year.

[107] To conclude, we have also mentioned the commission's introduction of performance standards in the papers, and this committee contributed to our previous consultation on that. We now have performance standards for electoral registration officers, and our performance standards for returning officers will be published in February so they will apply at the time of the European Parliament elections next year. Therefore, the minimum standards on which we are working in terms of disability awareness among polling station staff will directly feed into the performance standards that we are introducing. Those are the main points.

[108] **Mr Screen:** To endorse Kay's comments, we have done a great deal of work together on this issue. In the first instance, everyone was focused on accessibility as being the ability to get into a building, and it was always thought that disability was about being in a wheelchair, but it is not. We now have a greater awareness of those difficulties. As the Association of Electoral Administrators, we have tried to encourage people from the deaf community and blind community to come to our meetings and tell us their problems, so that we can look at them.

10.40 a.m.

[109] That is one aspect that we can look at positively. Kay is right that many of the problems that occurred last time can be fixed; they are silly things. I would not say that Caerphilly has been a leading light in training issues and so on, because it falls on me, year on year, and people think, 'Oh, Bob has come to do the training again.' However, there is a need to get some consistency into the training, and when staff leave the authority, they need to be trained as trainers. It sounds easy, if you have a group of 35 people at a time, to go in and talk to them about what they must do on election day, but the talk also needs to cover disability awareness training and simple things, such as asking why a polling booth is in a dark corner of the room.

[110] Bearing in mind that we have no power of direction as an association—we just encourage members through our meetings—we would like to encourage our members to take up a minimum standard, not only in training, but of what the staff should be aware. That would look at disability awareness training too, including asking simple questions such as why boxes are in the middle of the room and what would happen if someone with a wheelchair were to come in. It is easy; you would not have to spend a lot of money, and it is

common sense to move them. It is about achieving that standard. I was shocked to discover that there seems to be a great variance in the training that is being given, and in the local elections there were problems of funding. There were also briefings. For every election, we would expect that the presiding officers must have received a minimum standard of training. So, I endorse Kay's comments on that. We have moved forward a long way, but there is still a long way to go. We are more aware of the issues now, which is great. The paper is there, if there are any questions.

[111] **Joyce Watson:** That is right. Phil, is there anything that you want to add?

[112] **Mr Johnson:** In my day job, I am the elections manager and deputy returning officer for Newport City Council. I have been involved in elections in some shape or form for 28 years, and in the past five years, there has been a sea change with regards to access issues. Things that were not even talked about previously are suddenly top of the agenda. The Disability Discrimination Act 1995 has forced us, in many cases, to go out and look at buildings that we may not have seen for 10 or 15 years, and look at them in a new light. I am aware that, on the access issues, there has been a vast improvement. To echo both my colleagues, there is still a great deal to be done on the training front. I had an incident in Newport that starkly brought that home to me. We have to work with our staff to bring them up to the same standards as our premises. Bob has said it all, and it is in the report, but we are getting there.

[113] **Joyce Watson:** It is pleasing to know that we are moving in the right direction, because we all have a duty to ensure that people can access the places where they can exercise their right to vote. We have a legal right to vote, and it is hugely important that we allow people to take up that legal right.

[114] I will ask the first question. You said that we are moving in the right direction, which is clear from everything that you have said and everything that is in your report. You have highlighted a lack of training and awareness, and we must move to a stage where people have that fundamental, basic training, because there is no point in capital investment if the staff who use that do not know what they are doing or have good intentions from which there are unintended consequences, because they have not had the training. How confident are you that that training will take place and that those incidents—which, although they are small, are traumatic to the individuals involved—do not happen again?

[115] **Ms Jenkins:** May I lead on that? As far as the European parliamentary elections are concerned, we have a seminar planned for all electoral administrators in Wales in a fortnight. We will be discussing the issue of training there and highlighting the need to provide training. With the regional returning officer and our AEA colleagues, we will have a minimum standard of training, which we intend to roll out. We will be flagging that up with everyone—with all authorities—and they are all coming, in a fortnight's time, when we will tell them that that will be happening. We have other seminars planned for early March, which will be providing the training modules, so there is already a plan for rolling that out.

[116] **Eleanor Burnham:** I am intrigued by this training—if I may continue in this vein, briefly. I recall a tale of my first Assembly election to illustrate exactly the point that you made. In one authority, the polling station was very inaccessible even for an able-bodied person: it was on a corner, in an old chapel and you could barely get in as an able-bodied person, let alone a disabled person. I am pleased, therefore, to hear that the locations are much improved. In terms of training, it is very intriguing because many of these things are just issues of common sense, as you have just said. If you have any intelligence or sensibilities, which I presume that you would have for the job that you do as a day job because many of the people who are engaged in this, these days, are quite senior, it should be just a matter of common sense. What exactly is the matter? How do you think, therefore, that you are going to

improve awareness?

[117] **Mr Johnson:** One of the issues is that a tremendous amount has been invested in training polling station staff since 2001, but, unfortunately, in some cases, the people who are expected to deliver that training are administrators like us, who have no real skills in or background knowledge about what is needed to deliver that training. What we aim to do, in the next few weeks, is pilot a training-for-trainers course in south-east Wales, to give them the basic toolkit so that they can then go off and train their staff.

[118] **Eleanor Burnham:** With your indulgence, Chair, surely these trainers would have been working in the polling stations, so would they not have a modicum of understanding? You mentioned some very basic stuff, such as not putting a polling booth in a dark corner.

[119] **Mr Screen:** It is about silly things. Within the training itself, we can stress and emphasise these things. When I am training people, I mention these things. I am not aware that there were any problems in Caerphilly, but if there were, it would obviously be because I was not emphasising those aspects enough. It is things that we can learn from ourselves. On the staff being senior people, a huge mix of people attend polling stations and, yes, they can be senior, and they can be ex-council employees, but they can also be from any background. For the past two years, the training has been more focused on the huge change in legislation, which has probably been to the detriment of disability awareness. We now have an opportunity with the European elections because we have a period of stability. However, the main part of our training for the past two sets of elections—the local authority elections and the Welsh Assembly elections—would have been on the things that were new that they had to have a grasp of.

[120] **Eleanor Burnham:** Surely, if you have the training for certain elections, like the EU ones, can you then not carry on using the packs, the resources, or whatever you have got to engage with training on a similar level for other elections? Did you say that it was the council elections for which there was not enough money?

[121] **Ms Jenkins:** Yes, that is right; that is certainly true. Once the standard is in place, we will be able to roll that forward. I think that the issue that Bob raises is a fair one: for the past couple of years, because of the introduction of the new procedures on postal voting and the way in which that has had an impact on polling stations and the various procedures that they have had to follow, the training has been very much about providing briefings on the new process. That has partly meant that disability awareness has been slightly downgraded from where it really ought to be. Now that we have stability within the process, more focus can again be given to disability awareness and that can continue to roll forward.

[122] **Eleanor Burnham:** I am very intrigued by this. Surely, when you are setting up for a poll, somebody will have a checklist of what is what, what is required and whether it is all right before you open the doors and so on.

[123] **Ms Jenkins:** Yes. The commission has polling station handbooks that have an accessibility check list, which says very basic things like, ‘Make sure that the lights are switched on and that the doors are open.’

10.50 a.m.

[124] When the commission goes to visit polling stations—and each of our observers probably visits between six and 12 in a local authority area—the first thing that the polling staff do is proudly show us that they have the commission’s handbook sitting on the desk. However, they have not necessarily opened it, because when you ask them to show you how to use a tactile voting device, they cannot all do that. They know the principle, but not how to

use it.

[125] **Eleanor Burnham:** How many of them cannot?

[126] **Ms Jenkins:** They are a minority, and I do not want to blow it out of proportion—

[127] **Eleanor Burnham:** However, they are an important minority.

[128] **Ms Jenkins:** It is, because it affects every voter, and every voter has the right to expect the same standard of service.

[129] **Eleanor Burnham:** A disabled voter would need that extra bit of assistance.

[130] **Nick Ramsay:** I think that at some point we need to take a trip to this polling station of Eleanor Burnham's, as it sounds like a good case study. [*Laughter.*]

[131] Training and the training of trainers seems to be emerging as a key issue. You are developing a set of performance standards for returning officers, aside from general staff. Could you elaborate on those performance standards and on how you think they will help to improve access?

[132] **Ms Jenkins:** The commission has recently acquired the statutory remit for setting performance standards for electoral registration officers and returning officers, and we are at the first stages of rolling that out. We have published statutory standards for electoral registration officers and we are currently consulting on statutory standards for returning officers. They will be finalised and laid before Parliament in February, and so will apply at the time of the European Parliament elections. There is a draft standard for returning officers in the papers that I have circulated, including the relevant standard on accessibility. So, a broad standard will apply to all returning officers in GB, and, in Wales, we will try to flesh out what people in Wales should do to meet that standard.

[133] **Mr Screen:** That is a fair comment. We have our own individual performance standards within the authority, and there is some discussion about the number of performance standards and indicators that we are looking at. There was a general view within councils that perhaps there were too many, and we should be more qualitative as well as quantitative. However, we are working with Kay to get some qualitative and quantitative performance standards included. I feed them into mine. One of my performance standards will be the number of polling stations that are not fully up to Disability Discrimination Act 1995 standards. However, there must be an acceptance that, in some instances, there is no alternative. So, we have to put things into perspective and work wherever we can to meet those standards, but there will be occasions when there is no other alternative. We cannot just shut down a Portakabin that is out in the sticks and move 300 electors to the next polling station. The result would be a reduction in turnout. So, yes, we need to look at that issue, but, if there is no other alternative, we have to look at what we can do. It is about access to the service as much as to the building. Access to the building is of paramount importance, so buildings should have wheelchair access and ramps, but ensuring access to the service is also important. So, if there are alternatives, we should be looking at those.

[134] Over the past few years, the various groups that we talk to have increased their understanding and so they now know what needs to and what can be done. We work very well in Caerphilly with our Caerphilly access group and the DDA association, and so there is an understanding that although you are doing whatever you can, there will be instances when nothing more can be done. Building up that relationship is fundamental. One of the minimum standards should be that every administrator work with their local access groups. We have not touched on form design, but we should be working with British Sign Language groups to look

at that and all the other issues in that regard. So, we need to secure that awareness, as well as improve the training.

[135] **Joyce Watson:** Nick, did you want to ask a supplementary question?

[136] **Nick Ramsay:** Bob Screen has just touched on what I was going to ask in the supplementary question, namely improving the standard of stations in urban areas as compared with rural areas. Coming from a rural constituency, I know that there is a large number of small polling stations, often in village schools and the like, which are out in the sticks, and they have no obvious alternative. It is difficult enough for voters to get to the stations, aside from the problems that arise when they get there. Is it more difficult to improve standards in rural areas?

[137] **Mr Screen:** Very much so. There has been a huge improvement in the polling stations on council premises, because those buildings have to be accessible for their normal use, apart from their use as a polling station. In Caerphilly, we have tried to prioritise. Some polling stations are not really suitable, but we prioritise the changes that we make. For example, if there are six polling stations that need changing, we may not be able to make massive improvements to them all in the year before an election, so we will prioritise, and look at what we can do. Some improvements may take a little longer, and we may need to look at alternatives.

[138] It is more of a problem in rural areas. Church halls, for example, often lack funds to make improvements. I have tried to encourage them to look at grants, by giving them information about the grants that are available. However, if you cannot use authority-owned premises, it is difficult for church halls, and so on, to make improvements, and sometimes there are no alternatives.

[139] I am loath to say that there is always the postal vote, because people have the right to go to the polling station, but that is one alternative.

[140] **Nick Ramsay:** There is a balance to be struck between the accessibility of polling stations and people's choice to use them.

[141] **Mr Screen:** There is.

[142] **Bethan Jenkins:** I have two questions based on your report. I asked the Minister earlier about the absence of a Scope monitoring survey this year, and you note in your report that it is difficult to comment on how well the returning officers did because you received no evidence from Scope. Was there something missing? You had the Electoral Commission's report on access and disability, but was there something missing because you did not have that evidence, however well it might have been collated by Scope?

[143] **Mr Screen:** It was missing, and there have been problems with the methodology used by the Scope report. I have tried to work with Scope, but, quite frankly, I feel that we should be doing that ourselves. We should be doing our own monitoring, year on year, and not just going to inspect polling stations two months before an election. I mention in my report that we should have a plan for polling stations and we should visit them annually. We should be exploring alternatives and prioritising improvements at those stations where something can be done, although, with others, it may be a few years before changes can be made. It should be a rolling programme and, as a minimum standard, we should have a polling district review, profiling all polling stations and polling districts, which should be updated year in, year out.

[144] **Ms Jenkins:** I agree with that, because there is now a statutory requirement to review polling stations at least every four years. The returning officers and the local authority know

that they have to do that, so it is wise to establish a rolling programme, as Bob says.

[145] **Bethan Jenkins:** My second question is about something that I noticed in your report. You say that a lot of different groups discuss accessibility, from the election planning group to the Welsh Local Government Association and the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers. You suggest that there should be one central commissioning body. Could you explain how that could be achieved, and how it would lead to more effecting working?

[146] **Mr Screen:** It is open for discussion. The Electoral Commission has proposed an electoral management board, and we are still finding our way on how it will work, and what everyone's role will be. What role will we have as electoral administrators, and what role will the Association of Electoral Administrators have? The Electoral Commission needs to find its own role in certain areas, as well as the election planning group. So, we are feeling our way, but the danger is that we end up with too many bodies to report to. I go to the Ministry of Justice meetings, as well as suppliers' meetings in London and Wales, and I find that we are all talking about similar issues but sometimes we overlook the impact that one can have elsewhere. My fear is that we end up with too many talking shops, if I may say that. Sorry.

[147] **Bethan Jenkins:** Are you in discussions with the organisations that you named in the report to bring those voices together? Is there any progress?

11.00 a.m.

[148] **Ms Jenkins:** In our report in August, we proposed that electoral management boards be established in the English regions and in Wales and Scotland. That was particularly in response to the problems that occurred at the Scottish Parliament elections in 2007, when there was not such a central co-ordinating body. We are already ahead in Wales, because we have the Wales election planning group. The commission's proposals are currently being looked at, but Scotland is unlikely to go ahead with them. How that will work in the English regions is a different question, because they do not have a set-up at the moment. In Wales, we have the planning group, and we have procedures that work reasonably well, although they could probably be strengthened. Once we see developments across England and Scotland and how those organisational elements are to be taken forward, perhaps we can look at how things will work in Wales.

[149] **Bethan Jenkins:** Could you update the committee on what you do in light of that?

[150] **Ms Jenkins:** Certainly.

[151] **Eleanor Burnham:** In view of the surge in interest in the US elections, are there lessons for us to learn about our engagement with the general populace? We are discussing disabled people now, but do you believe that we have much more to do, not just in the training for when people arrive at a polling station, whether or not they are disabled, but in encouraging people to vote in the first place. I think that a lot of people feel intimidated by the thought of voting. Do you have a role to play? How will you engage with this committee or Brian Gibbons, the Minister? Perhaps it is an off-the-wall question, but I think that it is very important.

[152] **Ms Jenkins:** The commission is particularly concerned to encourage people to register to vote so that everyone who wants to vote is able to do so and knows how to do so. We have a lot of accessible materials, such as our www.aboutmyvote.co.uk website, which is voter-facing, and the recent innovation of our DVDs being available in a host of different languages, including British Sign Language. They feature young people particularly as well as people from ethnic minority groups. So, we have materials that are aimed at encouraging

people to register to vote who might not easily understand the registration process. We could be better at working with our colleagues on getting those materials out. It is all very well our having them on our website, but they need to reach the people who need to know about them. Electoral administrators need to know about them to promote them among the communities that need them, working with their local disabled groups and charities. So, there is a lot of information out there to encourage people to register; the problem is in getting it to the people who need it.

[153] **Mr Screen:** People are often not aware of it. I was quite surprised. I have a stock of those DVDs. We have recently started visiting schools and talking to the colleges, but I do not think that all of our colleagues are aware of what is on the site. Importantly, not even the deaf, the blind and the other disabled communities are aware of it. We can chase and find them, but it is a two-way process, and it would help if the groups were more proactive, and were aware that they can access these sites.

[154] **Joyce Watson:** Does anyone have any burning issues to raise? Useful though it was, we went off the subject a little, but never mind. There is an area of questioning that has not been covered. We talked about polling stations that you cannot make accessible whatever you do. We have some temporary solutions, such as temporary polling stations and temporary polling booths. Are you happy that, in most cases, people are trained adequately to know how to put those together and can ensure a smooth operation thereafter?

[155] **Mr Screen:** I am satisfied as far as Caerphilly is concerned. I am now an expert in putting polling booths up, and I show others how to do it. We need to talk to our colleagues and ask whether they do these things. That would be built into the training. There are simple, easy things, which I believe we have lost sight of somewhere along the line; I was surprised that even the minimum did not exist. However, it should be built into the training. People should be able to use the template, and not just be given it; they should be shown how it is used, and they should know how to erect polling booths and be shown examples. I always set up my training as a mini polling station, with notices and polling booths, and so on, but I do not know whether others do that. However, we can work as an association on this, and with the Electoral Commission team, and say, 'This is what you should be doing. This is the minimum standard that must be achieved; if you go above that, that is great'.

[156] I do not know whether I have answered your question.

[157] **Joyce Watson:** Yes, you have. It goes back to that minimum standard again, does it not, and ensuring that everyone is training everyone in the same way, using the same materials, and the same language—if that is appropriate.

[158] Does anyone else have any burning questions? I see that you do not. In that case, I thank our witnesses for being here today, and for putting yourselves up for what I believe was mild interrogation—or gentle questioning. [*Laughter.*] We look forward to continuing to work with you.

[159] **Mr Screen:** Thank you for the opportunity to come to committee.

[160] **Joyce Watson:** Thank you.

11.06 a.m.

Cynnig Trefniadol
Procedural Motion

[161] **Joyce Watson:** It is suggested that the next part of the meeting will be taken in private, so that we can agree the summary of the report on issues affecting migrant workers. I propose that

the committee resolves to exclude the public from the remainder of the meeting in accordance with Standing Order No. 10.37(vi).

[162] I see that the committee is in agreement.

Derbyniwyd y cynnig.

Motion carried

Daeth rhan gyhoeddus y cyfarfod i ben am 11.07 a.m.
The public part of the meeting ended at 11.07 a.m.