

Committee on Equality of Opportunity

MINUTES

Date: 16 September 1999

Time: 09.30

Venue: Committee Room 2

Attendance Members

Jane Hutt (Chair)	Vale of Glamorgan
Edwina Hart (items 1,2 and 3)	Gower
Christine Chapman	Cynon Valley
Carwyn Jones	Bridgend
Richard Edwards	Preseli Pembs
Helen Mary Jones	Llanelli
Jocelyn Davies	SW East
Glyn Davies	Mid & West
David Melding	SW Central
Kirsty Williams	SW Central

Advisers to the Committee

Mary Dunford	Acting Director, Equal Opportunities Commission
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Judith Jones	Commission for Racial Equality
Howard John	Director, Disability Wales

Officials

Kate Cassidy	Head of Public Administration, Equality and Public Appointments Division
Charles Willie	Head of Equality Policy Unit
Andrew George	Clerk
Julie Bragg	Deputy Clerk

Apologies were received from Janet Ryder.

Agenda Item 1: Chair's Report

1.1 The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting and introduced Judith Jones, representing the Commission for Racial Equality. She also welcomed representatives of the Welsh Women's National Coalition who were observing proceedings.

1.2 The Chair provided an update on some issues which arose at the first meeting:

- The childcare questionnaire had been issued to Assembly Members and their support staff but a full response had not yet been received. She encouraged those who had not already replied to do so by 17 September, the closing date for responses.
- Since the last meeting, information had been circulated on the Leadership Challenge.
- The Finance Secretary had agreed to keep Members in touch with developments on the new Assembly building and access arrangements.

1.3 Some important developments to note were:

- the Chair, the First Secretary and the Counsel General had spoken at the inaugural meeting of the Black and Ethnic Minority Consultative Forum at the Pierhead Building on 24 July. This event was very positive and established practical steps for the future. The Forum is to be formally launched in early November.
- A Listening to Women roadshow had taken place in Wales in July, co-hosted by Margaret Jay and the Chair. Welsh contributions will be included in the Listening to Women report due to be published in October.

- Although the Human Rights Act is the overall responsibility of the Home Office, the Assembly has an important role to play in assuring its implementation in Wales. The Committee was the natural forum to oversee progress.

Agenda Item 2: "From Equal Opportunities to Human Rights" – Presentation by Neil Wooding, Head of NHS Wales Equality Unit

2.1 Neil Wooding gave an overview of performance on equality issues within the Welsh NHS. He outlined the role of the NHS Wales Equality Unit in promoting equality of opportunity for all its employees and the general public who use its services.

2.2 A key issue was to challenge our perceptions of what constitutes equality and the approaches to achieving it. For example, an all-round approach would require resources to be concentrated in education (reducing disadvantage at the outset) and services for the elderly (improving their capability). Approaches which concentrate on valuing the capabilities of each individual would bring us closer to basing policies on the human rights of the individual rather than on their comparative condition.

2.3 In discussion, Members considered how the lessons to be learnt could be applied in all organisations and emphasised the importance of monitoring to assess progress. The Committee was encouraged to consider its role in urging other organisations, including Assembly Sponsored Public Bodies, to observe equality policies, and not just pay lip service to them.

Agenda Item 3: "Understanding Disability" – Presentation from Howard John, Director, Disability Wales

3.1 Howard John led a discussion which focussed on examining how the Assembly addresses equality issues and the action which might result. He highlighted the Assembly's role in decision making and the fact that all decisions and policies affect and are affected by disabled people.

3.2 Comments centred once more on the significance of monitoring and target setting in achieving equality of opportunity. The Assembly's current culture was considered and the importance of considering equality issues as an integral part of policy making rather than as a bolt on addition was emphasised. Decisions which might be well-meaning can nevertheless have an effect which does not take into account the needs of all groups within society. The Committee has a huge role in trying to influence opinions and actions which, however innocent, can lead to inequitable results. Something concrete and meaningful needs to be put in place to change this.

3.3 The Chair indicated that, in order to begin this process, she had written to the Chairs of Subject Committees to invite them to implement equality of opportunity in their Committees. She had also written to the Business Secretary to query how the matter of lack of representation from the Pre-16 Education Committee on this Committee could be resolved. The Chair proposed that she and the Advisers to the Committee should have an early meeting with the Panel of Chairs to discuss the importance of equality issues in their work programmes. Guidance for officials on assessing the

impact of policies and decisions on equality matters was currently being developed. The Committee would have an opportunity to consider this guidance when it was ready. It was agreed that the Committee could also develop some guidelines for the Subject Committees to use when scrutinising the work of Assembly sponsored public bodies.

Agenda Item 4: Immigration and Asylum – Presentation from Mike Boyle, Local Government Association

4.1 Mike Boyle outlined the timetable and provisions of the Immigration and Asylum Bill which is expected to receive Royal Assent in November. The Bill aims to cut the current average processing time of immigration applications from 3 to 4 years to 6 months and intends to replace applicants' entitlement to benefits with services and support in kind and financial support of £10 per applicant per week.

4.2 It is planned to disperse between 3,500 and 5,000 applicants per year to 10 regional dispersal areas of which Wales will be one. Local authorities and the voluntary sector will play a significant part in the new process both in the initial contact with applicants and their ongoing welfare and progress in integrating into society. The Government is currently consulting on the practical issues of dispersing applicants to the regional areas and will report back by the end of October.

4.3 The Chair reported that the First Secretary was writing to all local authorities in Wales encouraging them to become involved in the consortia which will deal with applicants dispersed here. As the Home Office has overall responsibility for the Bill, the Assembly has only a watching brief on its implementation. However, the Committee raised a number of questions about the Bill's implications, the cost to local authorities and immigration generally. The Chair indicated that progress on all these matters would be kept under review by the Committee and that she would meet voluntary sector groups including the Welsh Refugee Council to take this forward.

Agenda Item 5: Future Work Programme for 1999-2000

Paper: EOC 02-99(p.1)

5.1 The Chair introduced a paper which set out draft proposals for the future work of the Committee. It consisted of a mixture of briefing and topics for debate and consideration. This approach reflected both the remit of the Committee and the priorities for its work agreed at the previous meeting. She invited members to comment on the proposals.

5.2 A query was raised about the timing of consideration of the first draft of the Committee's Annual report given that the results of the internal Equal Opportunities Survey would not be available until January. There would be preliminary results of the survey prior to January but that would be the date when all the results would be available for consideration. Discussion of the draft Annual Report in February would enable Members to take a preliminary view on the report's structure, content, target setting and priorities for future action before they considered the final draft of the report in May. The Committee also asked whether it was possible to timetable a discussion of the National

Curriculum for Schools.

5.3 It was suggested that a useful way forward would be for Committee Members to meet equality organisations or those representing minority groups within their constituencies in order to feed back issues and concerns to the Committee and so aid its operation.

Agenda Item 6: Minutes of previous meeting

Paper: EOC 01-99(min)

6.1 The Committee agreed the minutes of the previous meeting subject to an amendment to paragraph 1.4 to reflect more forcefully the Chair's view that 'equal opportunities is central to the Assembly's policies'.

6.2 The meeting closed at 12.35pm.