

COMMITTEE ON EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY EOC-01-99(min)

Minutes of Committee Meeting

Date: Thursday 22 July 1999

Time: 09:00 to 12:30

Venue: Committee Room 1, National Assembly Building

Attendance

Christine Chapman	Labour Cynon Valley
Richard Edwards	Labour Preseli Pembrokeshire
Jane Hutt (Chair)	Labour Vale of Glamorgan
Carwyn Jones	Labour Bridgend
Helen Mary Jones	Plaid Cymru Llanelli
David Melding	Conservative South Wales Central
Janet Ryder	Plaid Cymru North Wales
Kirsty Williams	Liberal Democrat Brecon and Radnor
Kate Cassidy	Head of Public Administration, Equality and Public Appointments Division
Charles Willie	Head of Equality Policy Unit
Andrew George	Clerk
Vaughan Watkin	(Acting) Deputy Clerk

Apologies were received from Glyn Davies, Jocelyn Davies and Edwina Hart.

Agenda item 1: Chair's Opening Remarks

1.1 The Chair welcomed everyone to the first meeting of the Committee. She said that there was a genuine desire and commitment to tackle discrimination and disadvantage within the Assembly. Equality of opportunity was also a duty laid upon the Assembly by the Government of Wales Act. Its importance could be gauged by the fact that this was one of only

two standing committees with a remit spanning the whole of the Assembly's functions.

1.2 The Committee had a remit to make sure that the Assembly has effective arrangements to promote the principle of equality of opportunity for all people in Wales. There had been a positive start in the establishment of an Equality Policy Unit which had already developed an action plan to mainstream equal opportunities in all that the Assembly does.

1.3 The Committee had an important role, as stated in Standing Orders, of monitoring and audit. It needed to ensure that the right framework was in place to support the Assembly, Assembly Secretaries and every committee in promoting equality of opportunity. Once that framework was established, it needed to ensure that it led to clear priorities and targets by which the Assembly's achievements could be measured.

1.4 Responsibility for equal opportunities would not just lie on this committee's shoulders. Equal opportunities was a corporate responsibility and is central to the Assembly's policies. Applying the principle of equality of opportunity needed to become second nature to everyone in their day to day work. It should be regarded as a necessary part of a professional approach.

Item 2: Presentations from the Commission for Racial Equality, Disability Wales, and the Equal Opportunities Commission

Commission for Racial Equality (Ray Singh)

2.1 Mr Singh thanked Members for the opportunity to address the Committee and welcomed the positive and encouraging messages given by the Chair. He felt that the Assembly needed to look at the bigger picture in relation to discrimination. Specific action needed to be taken in respect of ethnic monitoring, consultation with black and ethnic groups and leadership.

2.2 Monitoring was essential in order to identify and discourage discrimination. Consultation with the black and ethnic groups would allow the Assembly to understand the problems that they were experiencing. The Assembly needed to issue clear directions on these matters. Leadership was paramount. Ending racial discrimination was a challenge for the millennium for the United Kingdom as a whole but especially for Wales. Action must be taken to ensure that this happened and the Committee had a vital role to play.

Commission for Racial Equality (Cherry Short)

2.3 Ms Short concurred with the views of her fellow Commissioner. She added that the black and ethnic minority consultative forum and its sub-groups could help the Assembly to discover the views of black and ethnic communities at first hand. These communities had been a part of Welsh society for generations and should now be able to make their voices heard in the Assembly.

Disability Wales (Howard John)

2.4 Disability Wales is the national association of disability groups in Wales working to promote the rights, recognition, inclusion and support of disabled people. Mr John said that statistics suggested that there were over 400,000 people in Wales with a physical or sensory impairment, learning difficulty or mental health problem. Onset of physical and sensory impairments was age-related and was affected by demographic change.

2.5 All Assembly decisions and policies affected disabled people and all decisions and policies affecting disabled people have implications for the wider community. That included the work of Assembly departments and agencies, Assembly-funded bodies and bodies monitored through the Assembly under European-funded programmes.

2.6 In discussion Members said that the access arrangements for the new Assembly building were a matter of concern. The Committee agreed to take a keen interest in the plans for the new building and asked the Chair to raise the issue with the First Secretary.

Equal Opportunities Commission (Mary Dunford)

2.7 Ms Dunford said that there was still a vast amount of gender inequality in the workplace. Equal access to jobs and training were essential and the Assembly was in a position to adopt a good practice model which might achieve these aims. The Assembly needed to embed equality into all of its policies and delivery mechanisms. Baseline data was essential in order to set proper targets

2.8 The emphasis on mainstreaming was positive but training would be needed for all Assembly staff. There were still gender imbalances in pay. A radical approach might require a pay audit to remove inequality as a part of the Assembly's contract compliance procedures.

2.9 The Chair thanked all three organisations for their presentations. The Committee would have a strong interest in seeing that a dialogue with groups representing minority and disadvantaged interests took place at all levels in the Assembly. Members agreed that all three organisations should receive a standing invitation to attend meetings of the Committee as advisers in accordance with Standing Order 14.4

Agenda Item 3: Introduction from the Equality Policy Unit

3.1 Kate Cassidy explained the wider role of her Division and invited Charles Willie to explain the role of the Unit. He said that the unit had been created to mainstream equal opportunities in all of the Assembly's policies and functions. He had tried to adopt an inclusive approach which sought to find a coherent approach to all equality issues. A key objective of the Unit was to equip divisions throughout the Assembly with the skills and knowledge to take equality of opportunity properly into account. Good relationships had been established with outside bodies and the Unit had produced an Action Plan which the Committee would consider under the next agenda item.

Item 4: Proposed approach to equal opportunities within the National Assembly for Wales Paper EOC 01- 99 (p.1)

4.1 The Chair introduced paper EOC-01-99(p.1) which asked the Committee to endorse her proposals for the way in which equal opportunities would be taken forward by the Assembly. The initial focus would be on disability, race and gender. Equal Opportunities would be the concern of the whole Assembly rather than leaving it with the Equal Opportunities Committee. The Chair, Assembly Secretaries, the Equal Opportunities Committee, other committees and the full Assembly would all have a strategic role to play in order to achieve this.

4.2 The starting point for the Action Plan was a baseline assessment to gauge where the Assembly stood in relation to equal opportunities across each subject area and as an organisation. The second stage would be for each Assembly Secretary to propose priorities and targets based on that assessment. Thirdly, there was a need to raise awareness and deepen understanding. Every part of the Assembly needed to develop a dialogue with those representing disadvantaged groups and to frame its policies on the basis of the advice and guidance they provide.

4.3 In discussion Members welcomed this approach. The initial focus on disability, race and gender was approved although Members noted the need to have regard to other sources of discrimination and social exclusion including age, religious beliefs and sexual orientation. Other comments included:

- the desirability of discussing the annual reports of relevant equality organisations
- the need to monitor the subject committees' work programmes. The Clerk was asked to provide details of these. The Chair should raise the lack of representation on the Committee from the Under-16 Education Committee, and the European Committee with the First Secretary

- the need for all Members and staff to receive appropriate training
- the approach should encompass Assembly-sponsored public bodies
- the Committee should demonstrate leadership and take practical action to enforce its approach wherever necessary.

Item 5: Future Work Programme and Procedures

5.1 The Chair said that the Committee would aim to meet once a month. Members agreed that the next meeting on 16 September would be a briefing session. There was also the possibility of extra briefing sessions in the autumn if necessary. The Clerk would circulate a suggested programme. It was agreed that the Committee should meet outside Cardiff at least once a year.

5.2 The Chair reported that she was beginning to receive requests to meet the Committee from interested parties. In the light of the timetable pressures on Members, it was agreed that while some organisations might be invited to meet the Committee as a whole, multi-party delegations should meet others and report back to the Committee. Members agreed that delegations should meet the Wales TUC Women's Committee and the Race Relations Equality Advisory Service.

5.3 A concern was raised about whether the level of staffing in the Equality Policy Unit was adequate to carry out the substantial work programme just adopted. The Chair noted these concerns.

5.4 The meeting closed at 12.35 pm.

Committee Secretariat July 1999