Dear Ms Mitchell

I am writing to provide you with additional information I promised to send following my appearance before the Equal Opportunities Committee on Tuesday 26 February 2008. There were two points I promised to provide information on.

Firstly, on the issue of communication support to students as per Recommendation 56 which recommended that the “Scottish Executive, the funding council and further and higher education providers should work together to investigate ways of increasing the availability of a comprehensive range of communication support to disabled students, such as Deafblind communicators, Palantypists, Makaton, graphic symbol charts, speech-to-text reporters and British Sign Language interpreters”.

There are a number of different ways in which the Scottish Government, the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) and further and higher education institutions are working to increase the range of communication support available for disabled students.

The Scottish Government has invested more than £300k over the past three years to fund the Graduate Diploma in the Teaching of BSL Tutors. The first cohort of students have now graduated, eight with a Graduate Diploma and two with Certificates. We believe that this course is an essential building block in developing the infrastructure for teaching of BSL at the higher levels which will contribute to the strategic aims of increasing the numbers of BSL/English interpreters, of bi-lingual professionals and of others. Funding for a second Diploma course is under consideration.

The Scottish Government’s Equality Unit has for a number of years also contributed towards various initiatives including the training of workers with deaf blind people, having specialist qualifications mapped onto the Scottish Qualifications Framework, supporting the Scottish Association of Sign Language Interpreters to advance the registration of BSL/English interpreters and to developing information on the BRITE website by funding an information gathering project by FACE.

The Committee may wish to note that the BRITE Centre, which is funded by the Scottish Funding Council, has produced an interactive resource for students who are deaf, or have
hearing loss, and the people who work with them. Whilst this is a student guide it also contains a staff guide compiled by the Furthering Access to College Students (FACE) for Deaf Students. The principles of this apply equally to higher education and there are proposals to raise the profile of this facility amongst Higher Education Institutions.

As I informed the Committee during my recent appearance we have increased the threshold for Non Medical Personal Help (NMPH) from £12,420 to £20,000. This decision was based on evidence provided by stakeholders from the higher education sector that many students who require expensive communication support often reach their maximum NMPH threshold and then rely upon the institution to pay for their support. This increased threshold will mean that there is adequate financial support available to pay for communication support.

The British Sign Language and Linguistic Access Working Group (BSL&LAWG) established in 2000 by the Government was restructured during 2007 to support the appointment of a Project Manager in producing a ‘road map’ for improving linguistic access. The ‘road map’ is currently being finalised and it will offer guidance on how to improve linguistic access across all public sectors, not only to the further and higher education sectors. The roadmap will be made available on the Government’s web site alongside an education scoping report which was commissioned by the Equality Unit. Together these reports will provide a comprehensive record of linguistic access in all educational sectors and will offer many suggestions for improvements.

Initial findings from the ‘road map’ seem to indicate that recent developments in policy, legislation, technology and sign linguistics have given cause for renewed optimism in addressing evidence of under-attainment among deaf pupils. However it is recognised that sources of statistical information are needed to track the impact of developments, taking into account the complexities of specific factors likely to make a difference (including factors relating to linguistic access). While there are UK-wide moves to develop such sources; it is vital that the distinctiveness of the Scottish situation is addressed in any developments.

The next phase of work for the Equality Unit and for the BSL&LAWG is to collaborate with relevant colleagues, inside and outside of Government, to work towards mainstreaming linguistic access within their operations. This will include making links between Government officials and bodies such as the SFC with groups or organisations which can assist them with specialist expertise.

Ultimately however responsibility for delivering education in a format that meets the needs of the students rests with the institutions. I understand that several colleges and universities have recently written to the Committee to provide an update on how institutions are progressing with the recommendations including specific comments in relation to Recommendation 56.

The second question raised by the Committee related to which organisations have been involved in the refocusing of Careers Scotland. I can confirm that as Careers Scotland moves into Skills Development Scotland, it is continuing to re-focus its services to young people in schools. A particular focus is on providing more intensive interventions to young people who require additional support to make a successful transition beyond school which would include young people with disabilities.

In response to the Parliament’s Disability Inquiry and to their own consultation with disability organisations (many of which are members of Inclusion Scotland), Careers Scotland has
developed a Disability Action Plan which was sent to the Equal Opportunities Committee in December 2007 and which Careers Scotland is now progressing.

Careers Scotland has also undertaken an internal review of activity with pupils with additional support needs and have produced an action plan to improve transitions for young people with a disability. Actions focus on partnership activity and improving the skills and confidence of their staff. To this end, Careers Scotland has undertaken a procurement process to develop and deliver comprehensive equality training to all Career Scotland staff which will focus on disability and cultural awareness. Training will be rolled out over a 2 year period starting in Summer 2008.

Careers Scotland also held a Disability event in October 2007 to which over 40 organisations were invited - including Inclusion Scotland. They are continuing to work in partnership with a number of organisations with particular expertise e.g. they supported Enable with the development of the “Moving On” CD Rom, providing transitional support for young people with learning disabilities.

Careers Scotland is also looking at ways of involving young disabled people through a joint pod casting project with Young Scot, schools, RNIB and Enable.

It is the current expectation that Skills Development Scotland will be developing an Equality Scheme which will provide them with an opportunity to engage with a number of equality organisations including those mentioned above - and most importantly with Careers Scotland’s customers.

I hope this information is of assistance to you and other members of the Committee.

Yours sincerely

FIONA HYSLOP