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Briefing for the Public Petitions Committee on petition PE2230: Guarantee a neurodevelopment assessment within 6 months for children displaying risk behaviours, lodged by Stephanie McDowell and Dale McDowell

Brief overview of issues raised by the petition

PE2230 calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to establish a national six-month maximum waiting time for neurodevelopmental assessments for children displaying significant behaviours or emotions which raise concerns, including those in relation to safety, ensuring families can access timely assessment, support, and intervention.

Current estimates suggest that roughly 10-20% of people are neurodivergent. Specific forms of neurodivergence that cause significant functional impairment are classified as neurodevelopmental conditions. Examples include:

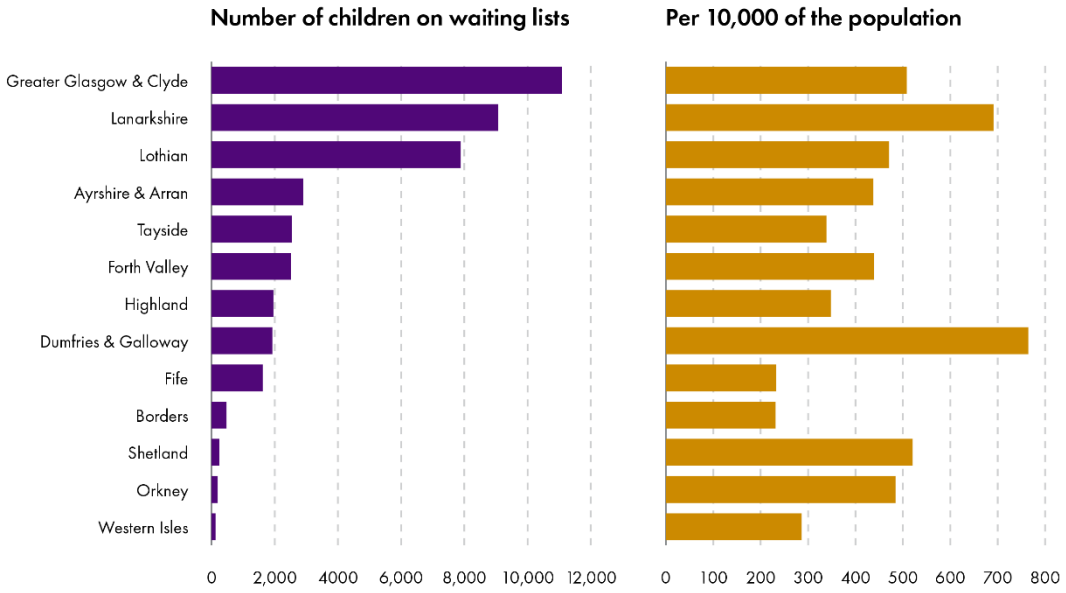
- Autism
- Attention Deficit-Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)
- Developmental Co-ordination Disorder (DCD, formerly known as dyspraxia)
- Developmental Language Disorder (DLD)
- Dyslexia and dyscalculia
- Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD)
- Tourette's syndrome.

An increasing number of people in Scotland are seeking neurodevelopmental assessments for conditions such as autism and ADHD. Experts think that this surge in demand is driven mostly by increased awareness of neurodivergence and how it presents, rather than an increase the number of neurodivergent people.

Waiting times

There has been much discussion of current waiting times for neurodevelopmental assessments for both children and adults. The Session 6 Health, Social Care and Sport Committee undertook an inquiry into ADHD and autism pathways and support. Its report made a number of recommendations in relation to accessing assessment waiting times and gatekeeping.

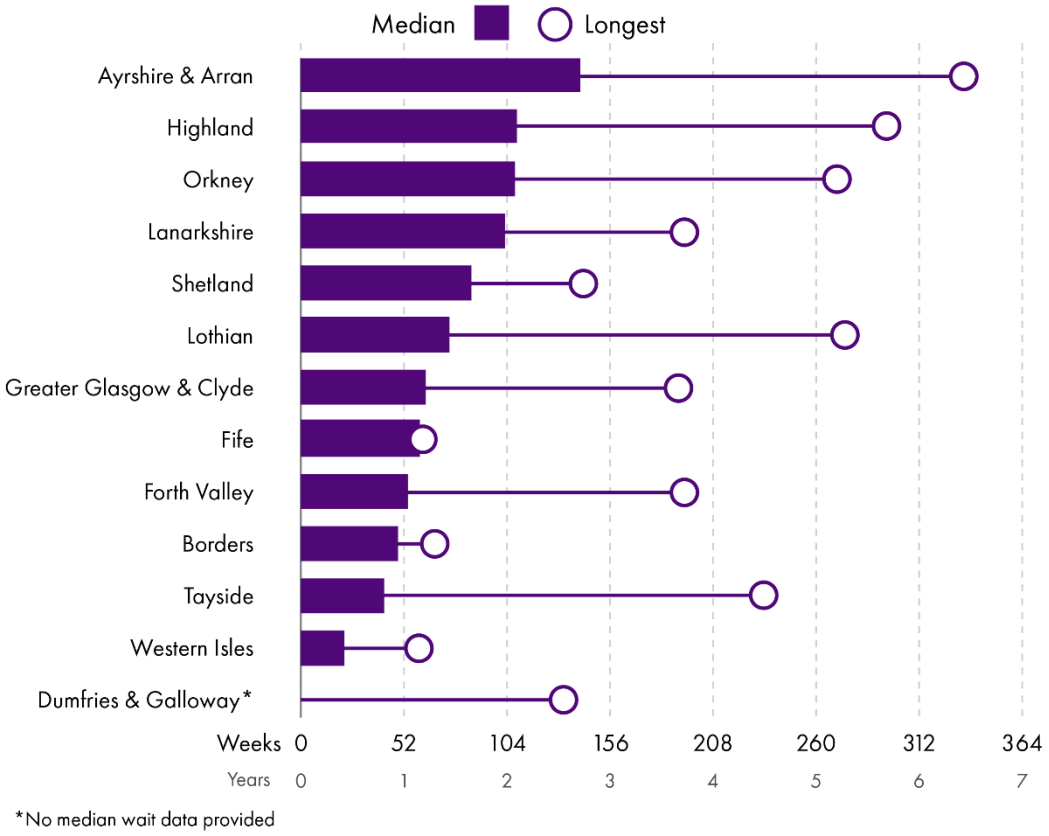
In March 2025, the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee wrote to each of the NHS Boards to request data about neurodevelopmental pathways and waiting times in each area. Thirteen of the fourteen health boards reported the number of children waiting for neurodevelopmental assessments as of March 2025. Across the boards that responded, there were 42,350 children waiting for an assessment.



Source: [SPICe Blog - Waiting for neurodevelopmental assessments: what do the numbers say?]

The analysis by SPICe, in 2025, also found that median waiting times for children seeking a neurodevelopmental assessment ranged between 22 weeks (NHS Western Isles) and 141 weeks (NHS Ayrshire and Arran), with an average median waiting time of 76 weeks. Longest waiting times ranged between 69 weeks (NHS Fife) and 342 weeks (NHS Ayrshire and Arran), with an average longest waiting time of 196 weeks[1].

[1]NHS Grampian could not provide data specific to neurodevelopmental cases. NHS Dumfries and Galloway provided a longest waiting time only.



Source: SPICe briefing: Neurodevelopmental Pathways and Waiting Times in Scotland

A study by the National Autism Implementation Team (NAIT), published in 2025, reported that "children with more complex health and developmental issues had to wait longer [for assessment and diagnosis]".

In its written submission on the petition, the Scottish Government said:

> "The Scottish Government recognises concerns about long waits for neurodevelopmental diagnostic assessment and support. We also recognise concerns that some children may not always receive support as quickly or consistently as they should. However, we do not currently plan to introduce a national six-month waiting time standard for neurodevelopmental diagnostic assessment."

Pathways

The delivery of neurodevelopmental pathways in Scotland is managed by the NHS territorial health boards and the Health and Social Care Partnerships (HSCPs). In particular, the pathways for children should be embedded within the Getting It Right For Every Child (GIRFEC) framework.

In 2021, the Scottish Government published Children and young people - national neurodevelopmental specification: principles and standards of care this outlines the importance of the universal Health Visiting Service and GIRFEC National Practice Model to:

- Identify children with neurodevelopmental profiles who are at risk, at the earliest stage.
- Contribute to the creation of a relevant individual child's plan .
- Identify those children requiring targeted or specialist support through staged intervention
- Identify those children requiring further assessment, formulation, recommendations, and diagnosis where this would be helpful and appropriate.
- Provide support through the team around the child to adapt daily routines in naturally occurring environments to reduce the negative impact of neurodevelopmental differences.
- Provide adaptations for parents where required (e.g. advocacy, peer support, translation and interpreter support where English is not the first language or where there might be cultural barriers, 'plain English' adapted supports for parents with a learning difficulty).
- Provide adaptations to support such as respite and/or periods of substitute parental care, which take account of the need for carers to understand individual support needs and strategies arising as a result of a neurodevelopmental profile.
- Support for income maximisation/financial inclusion.
- Signpost to relevant resources and supports.

In response to Parliamentary Questions including S7W-01702 and S7W-02358. The Scottish Government has said that it is:

> "[…] committed to delivering a programme of work to support health boards and local authorities to deliver the aims of the Specification. Delivery is being supported by a cross-sector Children and Young People's Neurodevelopment Taskforce, bringing together expertise from health, education, local government and the third sector to ensure a collaborative, whole-systems approach is being taken."

The Programme for Government 2026-31 said that the Scottish Government would:

> "Adopt the Royal College of Psychiatrists' 4-tiered national pathway for neurodevelopmental conditions for adults and continue to implement the Children & Young People's National Neurodevelopmental Specification, to ensure anyone with or without a formal neurodevelopmental diagnosis can access the support they need when and where they need it."

In its written submission the Scottish Government also referred to its framework document Supporting Children and Young People Experiencing a

Mental Health Crisis. This states that “Neurodivergent children and young people have an increased risk of being in crisis related to mental health”. However, it goes on to say: “It is important that defining a mental health crisis should not be based on clinical diagnostic criteria, or an expectation that a mental health crisis will lead to a mental health diagnosis. Crisis may not necessarily be related to a mental health condition (e.g. a crisis could arise as a result of a difficult social situation), and the main aim should always be to provide the appropriate support”.

Additional support for learning

The Scottish Government has also published a Route-map to deliver a National Staged Intervention Model for Additional Support for Learning in Education. The National Staged Intervention Model is intended to provide a consistent approach across Scotland to recording and responding to children and young people's support needs. It will help ensure that children and young people receive the right support at the right time and that their progress is regularly reviewed. It will also help children, young people and families better understand the support available to them.

In school education (including early learning and childcare) local authorities are required to provide support to pupils with an additional support need. An additional support need is defined as when “a child or young person is, or is likely to be, unable without the provision of additional support to benefit from school education”. There is no requirement for the pupil to have had a formal diagnosis in order to access such support.

Key Organisations and relevant links

- National Autism Implementation Team (NAIT)
- Royal College of Psychiatrists
- Scottish Autism
- Scottish ADHD Coalition
- National Autistic Society Scotland
- Barnardos

SPICe briefing:

- Neurodevelopmental Pathways and Waiting Times in Scotland

SPICe blogs:

- Waiting for neurodevelopmental assessments: what do the numbers say?

- Neurodiversity, Neurodivergence and Neurodevelopmental Conditions: What are we talking about?

- Neurodevelopmental Pathways and Waiting Times in Scotland

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03 September 2026

The purpose of this briefing is to provide a brief overview of issues raised by the petition. SPICe research specialists are not able to discuss the content of petition briefings with petitioners or other members of the public. However, if you have any comments on any petition briefing you can email us at spice@parliament.scot

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