



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body
Thursday 19 March 2026 (Session 6)

Supporting elected Members with caring responsibilities to fulfil their role

Executive summary

1. The Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body (SPCB) has a statutory responsibility under the Scotland Act 1998 to provide the Parliament, or ensure that the Parliament is provided, with the property, staff and services required for the Parliament's purposes.
2. The SPCB recognises the demands of being an elected Member, including balancing home life in locations the length and breadth of Scotland with parliamentary business usually requiring being in Edinburgh for part of each week. The SPCB seeks to provide services and facilities, within its remit, that will support Members with diverse needs, including providing services and facilities that will assist Members with caring responsibilities to fulfil their democratic role.
3. The SPCB has implemented a range of policies and practices to support MSPs in balancing their professional responsibilities with family and personal life.
4. This paper provides a detailed report back to the SPCB on additional work the SPCB commissioned officials to investigate on options for enhancing the support available to Members with caring responsibilities.
5. The paper highlights existing provision and work done to date this session. From the outset of this work, the SPCB has approached the issue of caring responsibilities with the explicit intention of identifying every realistic and lawful option available to it. Officials were asked to test the limits of what could be delivered within the SPCB's statutory powers, regulatory requirements, the physical estate at Holyrood, and obligations to value for money. This has included detailed engagement with regulators, professional advisers, security partners, and comparative practice. The conclusions reached in this paper demonstrate that all viable options have been thoroughly explored and responsibly exhausted, with the welfare of children, Members, and the public purse as the overriding considerations. The additional measures recommended can be implemented for session 7.

Background

6. Members' roles encompass both representative and parliamentary responsibilities. Parliament sitting patterns are structured to allow MSPs to spend Fridays to Mondays in their constituencies or regions, reflecting the former responsibility. Recesses, when Members also fulfil their representative role, and can take holiday leave, are aligned with Scottish school holidays. In sitting weeks, decision times are typically scheduled close to 5pm to support family commitments.

Developments in Session 6

7. In Session 6, the SPCB has met with the Parliamentary Bureau to consider approaches to better managing any late sittings that may occasionally be required within the session, to minimise their impact. The SPCB has agreed that, where late sittings are required, business should conclude no later than 10pm. The Bureau has also agreed that, wherever possible, changes to business that affect the timing of Decision Time should have at least 24 hours' notice.
8. In session 6, the SPCB has put in place a range of technology platforms and wider changes to support hybrid parliamentary business. The Parliament agreed that hybrid proceedings, established during the Covid-19 pandemic, would remain in place as an options for participation in parliamentary business. MSPs can participate in Chamber and committee sessions remotely, including remote voting.
9. The SPCB has also increased the provision of its IT kit and wider investment to support hybrid working for MSPs, which increases flexibility to work across a range of locations, including from home.
10. The Parliament also agreed to established a Proxy voting scheme that allows a Member to be authorised to exercise a vote on behalf of another Member in Chamber proceedings, in situations of parental leave, serious illness, bereavement, or caring responsibilities.
11. Whilst MSPs are not employees and do not qualify for statutory leave entitlements, the SPCB makes provision for full salary during periods of parental leave.
12. The SPCB updated the Members' expenses scheme from Session 6 to support Members with caring responsibilities to qualify for access to Edinburgh accommodation (rather than hotel provision).
13. Following the sessional review of the Members' Expenses Scheme in 2025, the SPCB agreed additional provision to support Members with emergency care to help with late sittings, meetings and other parliamentary activities where normal care is not feasible for whatever reason.

Issues and options

14. The SPCB has commissioned officials to look at options to enhance support for those with caring responsibilities.

Holyrood crèche

Historical context

15. In Session 1, the Scottish Parliament had no crèche or nursery provision at its temporary location. In February 2001, the SPCB agreed that the User Brief, which defined the detailed requirements for accommodation and services at Holyrood, be amended to require the provision of a crèche within the Parliamentary complex. This was in preference to providing a nursery. That decision was made primarily to support public engagement with the Parliament and in recognition that the space available could not accommodate both a crèche and a nursery. Passholder use of the crèche was restricted to emergency use only.
16. The crèche opened in October 2004. The service then, and now, is run via a qualified contractor, paid for by the SPCB.
17. During Session 2, there was extensive public and media comment on the low take up of places in the crèche and, therefore, the value for money of the cost to the public purse. Recognising that the business model was not sustainable, the SPCB commissioned an immediate review. Members and their staff were represented on the crèche advisory working group which made recommendations to the SPCB. Following this, the SPCB agreed to extend the crèche provision to Members and other passholders on a charged, pre-bookable basis while maintaining a free service for visitors. Bookings for the crèche ran on a “first come first served” basis thereafter.
18. A crèche differs from a nursery. A crèche is only ever envisaged as an occasional drop-in service. As such it does not provide continuity of care in a setting with other children and staff who know each other well and have strong relationships. A crèche does not provide structured learning or support and so it is not considered to be in the best interests of children as a suitable environment for longer-term care.
19. The crèche was therefore licensed to offer a maximum of a four-hour time slot per day, per child, Monday to Friday.
20. This provision continued until the crèche was closed due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The crèche re-opened in September 2023, on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays, the days when the building is busiest and in line with parliamentary business.
21. The crèche requires to be licensed by the Care Inspectorate (CI) and can only operate if it meets the regulator’s requirements. Licensing decisions are based on a range of Scottish Government guidance and Health and Social Care Standards. In reassessing the Scottish Parliament crèche, a more restrictive licence limiting care to four hours per week per child was put in place. This was primarily due to

REFERENCE: SPCB (2026) – Paper 24

the lack of outdoor play space available, and children’s inability to access this outdoor space independently, as required by updated Health and Social Care Standards and Scottish Government guidance “Out to play”, and “Space to grow”, which had recently been introduced.

22. The SPCB acknowledges the desire of some Members for a childcare service that helps them manage the demands of working for part of the week some distance from their home. The SPCB recognises that the crèche service is not sufficient to provide Members with childcare that covers the period of, for example, a longer committee meeting or an afternoon Chamber session. The crèche is therefore of limited use as part of the package of childcare services required by Members.

Licence discussions with the Care Inspectorate

23. In response to the more restrictive licence, the SPCB asked officials to robustly and exhaustively explore all options to extend the provision of the crèche. Officials undertook extensive and sustained engagement with the CI over several months to test whether any alternative operating models, physical adaptations, or mitigations could enable longer or more flexible provision within Holyrood. Discussion between senior officials at the Parliament and the CI explored a range of potential adjustments, including variations to operating days, session length, and access arrangements.
24. Despite this detailed exploration, the CI was clear that a return to previous arrangements, or any extension beyond the agreed parameters, could not be supported within the current regulatory framework. The variation agreed in December 2023 which allowed a maximum of 3-hours, 3 days per week, per child, or 4-hours once per week, therefore represents the maximum level of provision that can be responsibly and lawfully delivered in the existing environment.
25. The crèche will continue to offer the public and passholders the opportunity to have their children aged between six weeks and five years old looked after for three hours per day on three days per week, or for four hours once per week, in line with the registration agreed by the CI in December 2023. The crèche remains free for the public, as it has been since it opened in 2004, while passholders are required to pay a fee of £4 per hour. The total cost to the SPCB of the contract is £150k in 2025-26.
26. There is no further scope to extend the hours of care per day or per week per child provided in the crèche, nor would it be desirable in the interests of the child, reflecting the clear position of the regulatory authority.
27. **The SPCB is invited to note that terms of the current license for the Scottish Parliament crèche cannot be extended any further, following detailed discussions with the regulator.**

Nursery at Holyrood

28. A nursery service is registered early learning and childcare provision for children from birth to age five, focusing on education through play. A nursery service

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would provide the potential for significantly longer hours of structured childcare to be available. The requirements for registration of a nursery service are significantly different from those of a crèche.

29. As noted above, the provision of a nursery facility at Holyrood was ruled out at the User Brief stage of the Holyrood construction project. This means that this is now an exceptionally challenging aspect to address.
30. Officials were asked to stress test every plausible route by which nursery provision might be delivered, regardless of complexity, cost, or precedent. This included examination of onsite conversion options, newbuild solutions within the estate, offsite workplace models, and partnership arrangements with existing providers. Each option was assessed against the SPCB's statutory powers, regulatory standards, child wellbeing, security, operational impact, and long-term financial sustainability.

Viability of a nursery at Holyrood

31. Under the Scotland Act 1998, the SPCB is responsible for ensuring that the Parliament has the necessary premises, staff, goods and services to operate effectively. As well as providing services directly to the Parliament and its Members, the SPCB has the power to provide such services to the public as it "considers necessary or expedient for the purposes of or in connection with the discharge of its functions".
32. The SPCB has previously decided that provision of crèche facilities to facilitate parents of young children attending Holyrood to engage in the democratic process (whether as witnesses or visitors) meets this test. This is the basis for provision of the current crèche facility. Provision of childcare services beyond that necessary to facilitate democratic engagement would need to be assessed against the limits on the SPCB's powers.
33. There are reasonable arguments to support a legal basis for the SPCB to provide childcare services to support Members in the conduct of their parliamentary duties and other passholders in the provision of parliamentary services. However, it is considered unlikely that the SPCB has the power to operate a commercial offering open to the public in general. This paper accordingly assumes that any nursery service, and associated cost recovery, would be in relation to Members and other passholders only.
34. A key challenge is the extent to which a nursery could be sustained. It relies on there being enough children of passholders who are of nursery age, and those parents choosing Holyrood as their preferred childcare option. For Members this may mean travelling significant distance with their child to Holyrood, and once a child turns three years old there is a clear decision on where to be based for schooling.
35. Working with SPICe, officials have tried to do some sensitivity analysis to inform a decision on viability and cost. On a typical parliamentary business day 109 MSPs and 165 MSP staff access Holyrood. If those 274 people had the same number of young children as the general Scottish working-age population, we would expect them to have between 30 and 40 children under five years of age.

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As not all parents will choose Holyrood as their preferred nursery, especially not for the full year, this is not a sufficient pool to build a case for a nursery on. Given this, the figures below are based on the nursery being available to all passholders. On average, 700 passholders access Holyrood each business day, and if they had the same number of young children as the general Scottish working-age population it is likely they would have between 80 and 110 children under five years of age. It is important to note that the average age of both MSPs and the wider passholder group is likely to be higher than the average working age in Scotland.

36. The CI stipulates the required space for children, and it also sets legal requirements for child-to-adult ratio. The age group and ratio information in the table below is taken from CI guidance. The assumed capacity is based on feedback that the demand for spaces for babies is likely to be greatest and, therefore, building a nursery for three children under two years may not be sufficient, coupled with a requirement that the nursery needs capacity for children to move through the age bands.

Age Group	Ratio	Assumed capacity
Under 2 years	3 children to 1 adult	6 (2 adults)
2-3 years	5 children to 1 adult	10 (2 adults)
3+ years	8 children to 1 adult	8 (1 adults)
		Total capacity - 24

37. Nurseries customarily operate five days per week across the full year, providing children with consistent routines and continuity of care. In reviewing practice, officials were unable to identify any examples within Scotland of nurseries operating on a three-day-per-week basis or part-year basis as a standard model. Child wellbeing remains the predominant consideration in determining what constitutes a suitable care environment. A reduced timetable would require compelling evidence that it is in the best interests of the child, including continuity of relationships, predictable routines, and access to a consistently stimulating setting. While some MSPs may require childcare in Edinburgh only on certain sitting weekdays, many children would still require care on other weekdays, meaning a three-day- model would not meet the needs of the wider group of families likely to use the service and may not provide an environment that is sufficiently stable or beneficial for children.
38. The estimated running costs for a nursery with capacity for 24 children have been informed by indicative modelling of staffing requirements, food provision, overheads and operational fees. This work suggests an annual cost in the region of £320k. While income from user fees would offset a portion of this amount, users would be expected to commit to a full year of provision irrespective of how often they make use of the service.

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39. Indicative revenue modelling shows that, if a nursery were to operate at around 80% occupancy across both sitting and recess periods, and fees aligned with comparable providers in Edinburgh, it could generate approximately £140k per year in fees. This would reduce the annual cost to the SPCB of providing the service to around £180k. However, achieving occupancy at this level is considered unlikely in the Holyrood context.
40. A conservative assumption is that the annual cost to the SPCB would remain close to the full £320k. At this stage, these projections carry a high degree of uncertainty.

Care Inspectorate Licensing

41. Any nursery must be licensed by the CI. The CI has already raised a concern that if too few children used the nursery (for example on non-sitting days), it may not be a stimulating environment. This is a challenging risk to registration that would need to be addressed, well ahead of committing any spend on public building works.

Crèche viability

42. The SPCB would need to determine if a crèche service remains in the event of a decision to provide a nursery service. The SPCB recently decided it is an important aspect of its visitor offering. However, there are clear value for public money considerations in offering two types of childcare service in different parts of the building. Take up of each may impact the overall public subsidy required. It is, therefore, recommended that detailed demand analysis is undertaken to inform any future business case.
43. The conclusion that a nursery is currently not viable is reached with reluctance, recognising the strength of feeling among some Members. However, the evidence indicates that proceeding in the absence of sufficient demand, regulatory certainty, and operational sustainability would risk delivering a service that fails children, families, and public value expectations.
44. **The SPCB is invited to note that the demand for a nursery from passholders is currently highly unlikely to support viability overall. This could be revisited should there be a significant change in key factors, such as parliamentary sitting patterns, the circumstances of Members, etc. The SPCB is invited to agree that a survey is issued to all Members as part of the induction of Members at the start of the new session.**

Building works to create a nursery facility within the Scottish Parliament

45. A nursery, as previously outlined, is fundamentally different from a crèche. It provides education focused care delivered by appropriately qualified staff and relies on children forming sustained, supportive relationships within a stable setting. Nurseries must meet regulatory specifications, including defined internal space standards and direct, independent access to outdoor play areas.
46. The SPCB asked officials to assess all internal spaces at Holyrood with existing, or potentially adaptable, access to suitable outdoor areas. The only location that

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met these basic spatial requirements, when considered alongside the CI's requirements, was the Holyrood Room. If it were to be used for this purpose, the Holyrood Room would require significant adaptation to create direct access to external space.

47. Using the Holyrood Room for a nursery presents substantial constraints. It is the Parliament's premium events space, heavily used for Member-sponsored events, international engagement activities, dining services, and high-profile annual occasions such as the Burns Supper and the Festival of Politics. Demand for this space already exceeds availability, and its removal would significantly reduce capacity for parliamentary events.
48. From a practical perspective, its central location means that noise generated inside and outside the space would likely disrupt nearby chamber proceedings and office areas. Conversion costs for both internal alterations and external works are conservatively estimated at around £400k. Planning permission, noise impact assessments and detailed design work, along with any additional mitigation measures identified, would be required to establish total build costs.
49. **The SPCB is invited to agree that there is not currently a suitable location within Holyrood for a nursery.**

Feasibility of building a nursery within the Scottish Parliament's grounds

50. Two areas of the Parliament's grounds have been identified as potential sites for a new nursery building.
 - The land adjacent to the Historic Environment Scotland Lodge - this option considers either a new build in the landscaped grounds or repurposing the Lodge, a Grade A listed Victorian building owned by Historic Environment Scotland.
 - The land beyond the fins – this option considers a new build nursery in the peripheral quarter of the estate adjoining Queen's Drive and Our Dynamic Earth.
51. Advice has been obtained from Police Scotland's counter-terrorism team, the National Protective Security Authority (NPSA), and Lee Boyd (the Parliament's architects). The location of a nursery facility outside the protected perimeter of the Parliament building adds significant security considerations.

The land adjacent to the Historic Environment Scotland Lodge

52. It is considered unlikely that the Lodge itself could be repurposed as a nursery. Notwithstanding that it is not owned by the Parliament, its listed status, location within a Site of Special Scientific Interest and designation as a Scheduled Monument make substantial alternations extremely difficult. Conservation restrictions hinder adaptation, expansion and necessary landscaping changes.
53. The option of constructing a nursery on the land adjacent to the Lodge was also examined. However, significant practical challenges were identified. Parking for parents is limited, protected trees cannot be removed, and any development

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would need to comply with *Secure by Design – New Schools Guidance 2014*. The site's proximity to areas used for protest activity introduces further security considerations. Ecological constraints also restrict lighting and would require extensive environmental surveying before any development could be considered.

54. Taken together, these planning, conservation, ecological and security constraints mean that land is not considered a viable location for a nursery at Holyrood.

The land beyond the fins

55. The alternative option involves constructing a nursery on a peripheral section of the estate adjoining Queen's Drive and Our Dynamic Earth. While this site offers a slightly more generous footprint for a bespoke facility, it also presents several significant challenges. Environmental constraints are substantial: ecological sensitivities restrict lighting, require detailed ecological and environmental surveys, and are likely to prompt objections from Historic Environment Scotland (HES). In addition, a gas main runs through the area. While rerouting it is technically possible, the cost would be prohibitive.

56. The site is currently unlit and would require the installation of CCTV, lighting, and other measures to ensure a safe environment for children, staff and visitors. Although this area of the grounds is not typically used for protest activity, any new facility would still require proportionate security arrangements to meet parliamentary standards.

57. Initial cost estimates suggest a construction range of £3m–£5m, excluding design fees, gas main works and security infrastructure. If the SPCB wished to explore this option further, the next stage would be to commission architects to undertake Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) Stage 1 ("Preparation and Brief"), covering needs analysis, feasibility work and development of a detailed project brief, at an estimated cost of £60k. This would then inform a full business case.

58. Taken together, the scale of cost, uncertainty of demand, regulatory risk, and security implications mean that progressing these options would not represent a proportionate or responsible use of public funds at this time. The SPCB can therefore be satisfied that it has discharged its responsibility to explore these possibilities before concluding they should not be pursued further.

59. Given the substantial costs involved in progressing design work, it is recommended that a clearer understanding of demand from passholders is established before commissioning architectural work.

60. The SPCB is invited to discuss and note the examination of the viability of nursery provision. The SPCB is invited to include this paper and the reflections of the SPCB as part of its legacy report to the session 7 SPCB.

Creating a workplace nursery within the Holyrood area

61. Workplace nurseries can be created on premises close to the employer. Suitable premises, including outdoor space, would be needed close to Holyrood. The area surrounding Holyrood is urban with little outdoor space. There is a nursery within

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an 11-minute walk, and a review of the local area did not reveal any obvious accommodation closer than that which would be suitable.

62. Officials would not advise this route given that there is existing nursery provision within the Parliament locale and having consideration to the issues and risks as set out around viability of operating a Parliament-only facility.

Partnering with a commercial nursery within the Holyrood area

63. Officials explored whether any local employers already operate nursery provision that could support a potential partnership arrangement. To date, no viable opportunities have been identified. the SPCB may wish to note that the Scottish Government nursery is closing following an unsuccessful retendering process.
64. There are, however, a number of childcare providers in central Edinburgh, including some within walking distance of Holyrood or Members' accommodation. Nursery places in the city are typically in high demand, with many parents joining waiting lists well in advance. As previously noted, nurseries generally operate on a full-year model rather than aligning to parliamentary sitting weeks.
65. The SPCB could seek to pre-book nursery places for Members or passholders. This would require users to commit to the provider's commercial terms and conditions. Demand would be difficult to predict, and the SPCB would remain liable for the cost of any unused places. This approach could inadvertently disadvantage local families if spaces reserved for "Parliament use" were not taken up. For these reasons, officials advise against pursuing block booking arrangements on value for money and public impact grounds.

Bespoke advice and sign-posting service

66. Members' childcare needs vary. Officials currently contact Members where they are aware that a Member is expecting a child or may have new childcare needs. Members also sometimes proactively make their needs for support known to parliamentary authorities. This allows for a personal discussion about the childcare support that would help a Member in conducting their parliamentary duties.
67. A proactive signposting service to local nursery options near Holyrood would support Members who wish to explore childcare provision in the area and help them make informed decisions at an early stage. While recognising that signposting is not a substitute for direct provision, the SPCB considers it an important practical support measure that complements the wider package of flexibility, financial assistance, hybrid working, and emergency care now in place. This reflects a commitment to support Members at multiple points, even where direct service delivery is not possible.
68. **The SPCB is invited to agree that officials should enhance this service to offer a tailored discussion with individual Members to gather information on their childcare needs, and provide sign-posting to local nursery options. This would support Members who wish to explore childcare provision in the area and help them make informed decisions at an early stage. The**

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SPCB is invited to agree that this should be offered to all Members as part of the induction of Members at the start of the new session.

Alternative space at Holyrood

69. The possibility of the Parliament providing a dedicated space at Holyrood for nannies or childminders, where parents arrange the care but the Parliament provides the room, was also explored.
70. The CI, both through its guidance and through direct discussion with officials, has been clear that the current crèche service is not suitable for care exceeding three hours per day. It has also emphasised that any other form of full day care requires access to appropriate outdoor space and must meet other regulatory standards that ensure a high quality environment for children.
71. Viewed through this lens, providing an alternative space of a lesser standard would not meet the requirements for full day childcare, nor would it be in the best interests of the child. Officials do not, therefore, recommend pursuing this option.

Emergency and out of hours care for Members' dependents

72. Emergency care services provide a backup if regular care for children or dependent adults fails and would address a concern that several current Members have raised.
73. The SPCB agreed the recommendations resulting from the sessional review of the Members' Expenses Scheme on 25 September 2025. This included agreement of additional provision to support Members with emergency care to help with late sittings, meetings and other parliamentary activities where normal care is not feasible for whatever reason. It will be a simple receipt-based process managed via the Allowances Office.
74. Detail is set out in the Review of the Members' Expenses Scheme paper (SPCB (2025) Paper 45). In summary it will enable a Member to claim up to £1,050 per month emergency care cover for up to three dependents during sitting weeks of the Scottish Parliament.
75. **The SPCB is invited to note the introduction of emergency care cover for Session 7, as agreed as part of the Review of the Members' Expenses Scheme.**

Governance

76. This paper focuses on how to support Members with caring responsibilities, within the SPCB's remit under the Scotland Act 1998.
77. Assuming that the SPCB agrees to the recommendations in this paper, officials will implement the decisions.
78. Any future decision to pursue substantial investment in childcare facilities would be for the SPCB to consider. Any such proposals would be subject to a full business case and approvals by regulatory and security authorities. Funding

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would be subject to scrutiny by the Finance and Public Administration Committee and the Parliament as part of the SPCB's budget bid.

79. The SPCB would wish to secure wider political support for a substantial investment.

Resource implications

80. The potential costs and value for money considerations arising from different options are explained in this paper.

81. Further detailed assessment of resource implications would be provided to the SPCB when any options are pursued further.

Publication Scheme

82. This paper can be published.

Decision

83. In reaching these conclusions, the SPCB has explored all realistic options within its remit, and sought to balance the need to support Members with its statutory duties and responsibilities to the public. The decisions set out in this paper are the result of examination of all options. The SPCB remains committed to keeping support for Members with caring responsibilities under review as parliamentary practice, technology, and regulatory environments evolve.

84. The SPCB is invited to:

- note the changes to facilities, parliamentary procedures and the Members' Expenses Scheme this session that have provided more flexibility for Members, including those with caring responsibilities.
- note that terms of the current license for the Scottish Parliament crèche cannot be extended any further, following detailed discussions with the regulator.
- to agree that a survey is issued to all Members and other building users as part of the induction of Members at the start of the new session.
- note that the demand for a nursery from passholders is currently highly unlikely to support viability overall and that this could be revisited should there be a significant change in key factors, such as parliamentary sitting patterns, the circumstances of Members, etc. agree, after careful consideration, that there is currently no suitable location within Holyrood for a nursery.
- discuss and note the examination of the viability of nursery provision, and include this paper and the reflections of the SPCB on nursery provision as part of its legacy report to the session 7 SPCB.
- agree that officials should offer a tailored discussion with individual Members to gather information on their childcare needs, provide sign-posting to local nursery

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options and support to explore childcare options; and note that this should be offered to all Members as part of the induction of Members at the start of session 7.

**Operations and Digital
March 2026**