



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Education, Children and Young People Committee

Wednesday 26 March 2025

Session 6



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EDUCATION, CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE COMMITTEE
11th Meeting 2025, Session 6

CONVENER

*Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*George Adam (Paisley) (SNP)

*Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con)

Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)

*Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab)

*Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green)

*Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)

*John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)

*Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Iona Colvin (Scottish Government)

Natalie Don-Innes (Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise)

Gavin Henderson (Scottish Government)

Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Pauline McIntyre

LOCATION

The Mary Fairfax Somerville Room (CR2)

Scottish Parliament

Education, Children and Young People Committee

Wednesday 26 March 2025

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:30]

The Promise

The Convener (Douglas Ross): Good morning, and welcome to the 11th meeting in 2025 of the Education, Children and Young People Committee. The first item on our agenda is an evidence session on the Promise. We have received apologies from Keith Brown, and I note that Roz McCall is joining us this morning.

For our evidence session, we have Natalie Don-Innes, Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise; Gavin Henderson, deputy director for keeping the Promise; and Iona Colvin, chief social work adviser.

Minister, I understand that you would like to make an opening statement. Over to you.

The Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise (Natalie Don-Innes): Thank you, convener, for the opportunity to attend the committee today. I really welcome the committee's on-going engagement in and support for the work that is under way across Scotland to keep the Promise by 2030. The Scottish Government is committed to lead from the front to make national changes that will be felt by the care communities locally.

As the recent oversight board report identified, the Promise is on course and can still be kept by 2030 if everyone involved plays their part and works together constructively with children and their families. The Scottish Government is making progress and I hope that, through the detailed review of the implementation plan that was published last September, the committee will have been reassured by the breadth of actions that are under way. However, delivery of the Promise is a Scotland-wide goal, and it is only through local partners that change will truly be felt.

I sit here in no doubt that there is a lot more to be done and that there are a number of challenges to be overcome to get there. The cross-Parliament commitment that was confirmed during the debate in November is key to ensuring that we work together to ensure that politics does not get in the way of delivering the change that is required.

To help us all, nationally and locally, to achieve that, it is essential that we can fully understand the

progress that is being made across the country. The oversight board report has provided a high-level view. In addition, I know and have seen first hand, through visits to projects and programmes, through conversations with care-experienced children, young people, adults and families, and through engagement with carers and the hard-working workforce across the public and the third sector, that there is a lot of good work under way and that the commitment is strong.

To assist with that further, I have asked The Promise Scotland to provide a picture of the activity that is under way in localities across Scotland and to present the organisation's insights into what is happening. Fraser McKinlay has written to me recently to confirm that that work is under way and will be provided by the end of April. The picture will be instrumental in capturing the progress that, as I have seen, is under way on the ground and where the focus of our collective attention over the next five years must fall.

I am clear that progress through national indicators is not enough. Change must be felt by our care-experienced community. I, and many of you who were at the recent reception, have spoken to members of the care-experienced community who feel that things have changed. It is our collective responsibility to be balanced and to recognise success to date, as well as to recognise what more has to be delivered in the years to come.

The Promise progress framework, which was published in December, provides the basis for how we can consistently report on national data. It brings together, for the first time, more than 50 national data indicators that inform the picture of outcomes for children and young people with care experience. The next stage of work is to tell the stories of change.

As recognised as early as 2022, in the first iteration of our implementation plan, there is a place for legislation to support the change that is required. I will introduce a bill this year that will set out key provisions to increase the supports that are available to children, young people, adults and carers. The committee will recognise and respect that I am limited in how much more I can add at this stage, prior to the proposed legislation being agreed through the formal Cabinet process.

Convener, I thank you again for the opportunity to provide you with an update on progress on the Promise. We have an opportunity to work together to ensure that the Promise is kept. As Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise, and with the full support of the First Minister and the Cabinet, I am committed to leading the change that is required, and I welcome the committee's role in providing the appropriate level of challenge and support.

The Convener: Thank you very much, minister.

I heard what you said about the difficulties that you might have with regard to the proposed legislation, but we are the committee that will be scrutinising the bill, and I think it important that not just the committee but the Parliament is better informed of the timeframe. Where are we with the Promise bill, and when will Parliament see it?

Natalie Don-Innes: As the member will be aware, there were a number of consultations in previous years to help inform the direction of the proposed bill. As some of them closed only as recently as February, those responses are still being analysed, and they too will help inform the bill's direction. I am unable to tell you the exact timetable at the moment, but I assure you that we are working at pace to present the bill as soon as possible.

The Convener: If you cannot give us a specific date, give us a rough idea of when we can expect it.

Natalie Don-Innes: I cannot give you a rough date. I am hoping to introduce the bill prior to summer recess, but that is dependent on agreement by the Cabinet and the Cabinet process. That is my personal view; that is when I want to introduce the bill and, indeed, when I feel that it needs to be introduced with regard to the timetabling of the rest of the parliamentary session. I have been clear that I want the bill to be introduced through the parliamentary process in this parliamentary session.

The Convener: But it is not only you saying that—the programme for government said it, too.

Natalie Don-Innes: Of course—sorry.

The Convener: It was very clear about that. We are now in the final year of this session, and there is growing concern both within this building, I believe, and outwith that there will not be sufficient time to scrutinise the bill. You referred to the summer recess, but that would allow you to introduce the bill on the last day that we sit before that recess. Do you understand that it has to be introduced well before the summer recess so that we, as the committee scrutinising it, have time to sort out evidence sessions and hear from people who want to input into it?

Natalie Don-Innes: Yes, Mr Ross. I am fully aware of the process and I understand the concerns about timing.

The Convener: So, it will be introduced well before the summer recess.

Natalie Don-Innes: I appreciate that it is a concern. I have been very clear in my engagement with other MSPs; indeed, I invited all the other

party representatives to discuss the Promise bill with me to get an idea of their priorities for it.

I have been quite open about the bill. I appreciate that there is an urgency in terms of timing, but I do believe that—

The Convener: Are you 75 per cent of the way there, 90 per cent of the way there or 50 per cent of the way there? You talked about a consultation closing only last month; that sounds to me as if it will delay things further. Are you on the edge of being able to introduce the bill, or do you believe that there is still significant work that you and the Cabinet have to do before it can be introduced?

Natalie Don-Innes: Work is still under way, of course.

The Convener: So, give us a ballpark figure.

Natalie Don-Innes: I cannot give you a percentage for where we are—

The Convener: But you must know—

Natalie Don-Innes: We are dealing with legal matters. There are processes in place for writing legislation.

I will bring in my official, Gavin Henderson, to see whether he can add anything.

The Convener: Mr Henderson, what I am looking for is whether the bill is roughly there and you are, say, 10 per cent away from putting the finishing touches to it, or whether you are a long way off and it will be more likely that we as a Parliament will get it just before we all go on summer recess, meaning that our opportunity to scrutinise it will not start until September. That is a fear that I am now picking up from the minister.

Gavin Henderson (Scottish Government): As the minister has said, we absolutely respect the committee's role in giving legislation proper scrutiny. With regard to the process, what you are alluding to, convener, is our introducing the bill with sufficient time for the committee to meet in advance of summer recess and call for evidence. We completely understand that. We also understand, from the committee's perspective, that being able to go straight into stage 1 and evidence sessions immediately after summer recess would greatly enhance the time available for scrutiny.

The Convener: I want to make it clear that this is not just for the committee. We will meet as and when we need to, but there are people out there at the moment who are waiting for the bill and are getting equally frustrated that it seems to be continually delayed and to be getting pushed back and back. I am not getting much reassurance today that that is not happening,

My question to the minister—which she put to you, Mr Henderson—was quite specific. How far

are you down the line of building the bill and getting ready to present it?

Gavin Henderson: The bill is quite well developed—

The Convener: Is it 75 per cent developed? Ninety per cent?

Gavin Henderson: I would not like to put a percentage on it—I do not think that that is a fair thing to do. However, you will understand the process that we require to go through in order to have Cabinet agreement, the pre-introduction checks with the Parliament and so on.

The Convener: I am sorry, Mr Henderson, but this is not the first bill that the Scottish Government or the education department have ever come up with. You know about the processes. You know that the bill has to go through committees, you know the timetable in Parliament and you know the timing for the legislation teams—both in Government and Parliament. Nothing about this should be a shock to you, so why are we still here, unable to tell the committee and Parliament and people who are genuinely worried that we are going to run out of time to properly scrutinise the bill when we are even going to see it introduced?

Natalie Don-Innes: Mr Ross, I—

The Convener: Sorry, minister, just before I bring you back in, I do not think that it would have been difficult to predict that you were going to get this question from the committee today—in a meeting about the Promise—or that we would want to know a little bit more about the Promise bill. You have told us nothing.

Natalie Don-Innes: I have not told you nothing. To say that it has been pushed back and pushed back is unfair. For example, on the foster care consultation, which closed in February, MSPs across the Parliament have been aware that that consultation was open for that length of time. They were aware that it was closing in February. I have made it very clear that that was part of the work that would inform the bill, so there was no way that it could have been brought forward prior to that.

The Convener: That is my point, minister.

Natalie Don-Innes: I am trying to cover all areas that I believe are important to people for the Promise bill. I have been very open that I will be introducing a Promise bill, and I hope that that is enough reassurance. I very much understand the process. I understand that the committee needs time to scrutinise, and, of course, I want to give the committee time to do so. However, as members have alluded to before, it is a wide-ranging bill, with consultations that have only recently closed. We are working at pace to get this over the line.

The Convener: On that point, is it the case that it is only the fostering consultation that you were waiting for, and that a chunk of work had already been done and that will just get added on to it? That is what I am trying to understand. I want to know what stage are you at, how much has been done, how much is ready to go and what needs to be added between now and the summer recess?

Natalie Don-Innes: I am not really sure what more I can give you, Mr Ross, because some aspects of the bill—

The Convener: You have not responded to that point.

Natalie Don-Innes: As an example, take children's hearings redesign, which involves extremely complex legal matters. We are still working them through with law officers and drafting the bill.

The Convener: Were they not subject to the consultation that closed in February?

Natalie Don-Innes: No, they were not, but they were subject to the consultation that closed in October last year. There have been a number of months to work on that, but it is a more complex area. I cannot put a percentage on it, but I am confident that I have made a number of decisions that are going to form part of the bill. There are still some areas that we are looking to explore that I know are important to people, and we are trying to get it right for the people to whom it matters.

The Convener: Has it always been the intention to present the bill just before summer recess, or has the timing slipped at all?

The Convener: I do not believe that it has slipped. Some of the people I have met to talk about the bill expected it just after the Easter recess, which we are going into next week.

Natalie Don-Innes: That has not been raised with me. I have not had that discussion with—

The Convener: Has the timetable for the Scottish Government always been before the summer recess?

Natalie Don-Innes: I never set the timetable in stone. The timetable is aligned with having the appropriate content in the bill, so I never set a definitive timeline other than ensuring that we have enough time for the bill to go through committee scrutiny in the parliamentary process, which I believe it will do, if it is introduced—as I have said.

The Convener: I had a few other things that I wanted to speak about, but as it has taken 13 minutes to try to find out when we are getting the bill, I will move on to other members, and I hope that I will have time to come back to my points.

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): One of the things that you said in your opening remarks was that it is down to us all—the various stakeholders and everyone else—to try to deliver the bill. Therefore, my initial question is: how is the Scottish Government engaging with the Promise progress framework, and is that engagement on-going?

Natalie Don-Innes: I am sorry, Mr Adam, but could you say that again?

George Adam: How are we engaging with the Promise progress framework, and is that engagement on-going?

Natalie Don-Innes: Absolutely. As I said in my statement, I was very keen to see the Promise progress framework launched.

Something that is regularly brought up with me by MSPs from across the Parliament is how we are measuring our progress. The Promise progress framework is absolutely key to that, and we will continue to engage with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and other stakeholders to ensure that the data that requires to be in the framework is set out and updated at regular periods and that that progress is an accurate reflection of what is happening in Scotland.

George Adam: You mentioned in your opening remarks that the framework consolidates 50 national data streams. That is quite a bit. How do you manage to be flexible, take all that data on board and make it part of the delivery process for the Promise?

09:45

Natalie Don-Innes: I do that on a daily basis. The progress framework has been set out to enable organisations, politicians and care-experienced people to see an accurate record of the progress that is being made. It has not necessarily changed the areas that are dealt with or the focus on specific areas where further change is required, but it is key to reflecting progress.

George Adam: As information comes in from the data in the framework, and as the work continues with stakeholders, how does the Government plan to evolve the framework while addressing some of the issues that might come up through the process? Is there flexibility for you to do that? You might say that you are doing that already.

Natalie Don-Innes: We will ensure that the data is updated regularly so that it is an accurate reflection of what is happening. I am not sure whether Gavin Henderson can add anything.

Gavin Henderson: The Promise progress framework, which was agreed by a number of stakeholders including COSLA and The Promise Scotland, is intended to be a clear set of statements and outcomes with indicators to help us track delivery of the Promise overall. From that perspective, the idea is to be clear about the goal that we are trying to achieve collectively, and we are therefore transparent about the progress that we are making year on year.

The intention is not to change the indicators significantly, but the data sets are only the quantitative information—that is, the statistics. The actual experience of children and young people in the care community is another aspect, and relational improvement—the difference that is felt—is a big part of that. That is why the next phase of the work is to develop stories of change and the qualitative information about how change is being felt, rather than just the high-level statistics.

George Adam: I understand that, but we find that COSLA and those who are trying to deliver things at a local level are always saying that they are struggling to get things done. I assume that we should be able to use the data that we receive and feed it down to a local level, where it can be used as a foundation for delivery.

Natalie Don-Innes: Absolutely. One of the things that I have talked about regularly in relation to the Promise is inconsistencies across the local picture. Some fantastic things are going on across our local authorities, but we need to ensure that they are spread out—we need to share best practice. The Promise progress framework is one of a number of things that will be key to allowing local authorities to see how other areas are doing things and to make changes as a result.

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): Good morning, minister. I am quite surprised that we cannot get more detail on what is in the forthcoming bill. People watching this meeting, including care-experienced young people and those in the organisations that have been campaigning for action on the Promise for a long time, will be somewhat disappointed, I think, to hear the minister's response today.

I want to ask some specific questions about the bill itself before I move on to other areas. This time last year, care-experienced young people told the committee that they had not seen much change as a result of the Promise. Today, we cannot tell them what will be in the Promise bill, and we have heard the oversight board say that the bill could be used as an excuse for delay. What can you say to young people watching this meeting today to reassure them that things are progressing and that their rights will be enshrined in some form of legislation?

Natalie Don-Innes: I can say what I say to them every time I meet them: I am committed to bringing forward a Promise bill in this parliamentary session, and it will cover issues that have been brought to me and which young people feel need to be changed for us to deliver on the Promise. I can also speak to the consultations that have gone out in relation to children's hearings redesign and advocacy; aftercare; foster and kinship care; and the definition of care experience. Those four areas that we consulted on are informing the bill, and there are other areas that have been brought to me by children and young people. I reached out across the parties to get an idea of what members' priorities were, and I discussed those areas at the meetings that I had.

I find it difficult to hear, therefore, that people think that the bill might be used as a delay in delivering the Promise. As I have said, I have been very open and transparent in saying that a Promise bill is coming, but we want to get it right.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: But a bill has been coming for an awful long time—it predates your own ministerial role, and several people before you—and yet educational outcomes for care-experienced young people are still not the same as the outcomes for young people who have not lived with care experience. Their destinations are not the same, and they are still struggling to get housing support, throughcare and aftercare support, and, indeed, lifelong support.

We are still here today with no date for the bill to be published, and with legitimate and serious concerns that the committee could now face a very short scrutiny timetable, which is not really how we should be dealing with such important legislation. What is your response to all that?

Natalie Don-Innes: Ms Duncan-Glancy says that the proposal predates my time in office. That is absolutely the case, but, as I have made clear, I could not rush those consultations. The hearings redesign, and the work that was carried out by Sheriff Mackie and by the young people who were involved in it, were still on-going when I came into office. There was then a consultation to ask questions and ensure that those views were represented. We are talking about a lengthy process on very complex matters. I could not have rushed that any more, nor worked any faster, than we have done.

There has been really positive progress already. I appreciate that, as I recognised my opening statement, there are things that still need to change, but the passage of the Children (Care and Justice) (Scotland) Act 2024 was a huge step forward in the delivery of the Promise. A number of things have happened under this Government, such as the introduction of the Scottish recommended allowance and the investment in

the bairns' hoose, that are helping to deliver on the Promise.

When people say that young people feel that nothing has changed, I am sorry if that is the case. However, as I have said, I engage with young people weekly, if not daily, on the Promise, and I hear their stories—I appreciate that they do not come into the data sets or the figures on how delivery of the Promise is going, but I will give an example. At the parliamentary reception for the Promise, I was speaking to a young girl who told me how much she had felt a change in her experience in care in a residential home. She said that things have opened up more and she was allowed a pet, and the home had become more like a family home for her.

As I have said, that type of story might not always hit the headlines, but that change is happening on the ground. I appreciate that not all children and young people might be feeling it, but I believe that, as a result of the steps that we are taking through both legislative and non-legislative means, children and young people will feel the changes coming.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: To be honest, I do not doubt your commitment in respect of those examples, and it is helpful to recognise them. Nonetheless, the reality is that we still do not have the structural and systemic change that is necessary to effect the amount of change that is needed for those children and young people. I do not think that anyone could use the word "rushed" when it comes to getting this legislation through—it is taking some time.

I will finish on this. The minister mentioned Sheriff Mackie's review and other reviews, all of which have taken time. However, the Government must have known that all those things would take time before it marched young people up the hill to tell them that there was going to be a bill, and yet years have passed with no significant change in legislation for them. In fact, Opposition members have been told, about various things, "That will come in the Promise bill", even when we have tried to amend other bills to ensure that rights for care-experienced people are protected. I just do not think that that is satisfactory, minister.

Natalie Don-Innes: As I have said, the passage of the Children (Care and Justice) (Scotland) Act 2024 was a huge step forward in terms of legislative change. I think that the young people, and other people involved, who are watching this session will appreciate that, although things are taking time, it is my priority—as I have said—to get the bill right, get the right things in it, and make the necessary change.

It is not just through legislative means that we can make change. I have talked previously about

the things that we are doing that relate specifically to delivering on the Promise, and which will enable us to keep the Promise. However, there are other, wider priorities, such as whole family wellbeing and whole family support, that are fundamental to delivering on the Promise. They are perhaps more about the longer-term aims of ensuring prevention and getting to families earlier to prevent crisis points, but it is a bit unfair to say that change is not happening.

That said, I have recognised that we have further to go and that there are still children and young people who need to feel that change. That is what I am committed to.

The Convener: I get your clear passion for a piece of legislation, minister, although we do not have any more detail on it. However, this morning, you have told the committee that Cabinet still has not considered the further details or when the bill will be introduced. I will read to you from the Scottish Government's document "Keeping The Promise to our children, young people and families: progress update 2024", which was published in only September last year. I note the language used. It says:

"The Scottish Government aims to introduce a Promise Bill"—

it does not say "will introduce", so there is some ambiguity about that—

"by the end of this Parliamentary session".

It then says—this is the Scottish Government's choice of language—that that is

"dependent on wider pressures on the Parliamentary legislative calendar."

As the minister who is unable to give us any firm dates today, can you understand why people who are watching this will look at the Scottish Government's previous commitments and say that there are caveats in the progress update that will allow the Government a get-out clause to not implement the bill?

Natalie Don-Innes: I do not think that I can provide any more assurance. I have not given you a firm date, but I have said that I want the bill to be introduced prior to the summer recess.

The Convener: Do you accept that, when your Government provided an update just last September, it used language that would allow it to very easily drop the bill because of wider pressures on the parliamentary legislative calendar, which we all know that we get at this stage of a parliamentary session? Do you accept that?

Natalie Don-Innes: I accept that that is the language that was used, but, as I have said, I have given a very clear assurance—

The Convener: You were the minister at the time, so—

Natalie Don-Innes: As I have said, I have given a very clear assurance about my priority in terms of introducing the bill—

The Convener: But you agreed to that—

Natalie Don-Innes: I cannot—

The Convener: I am sorry, but can I just check that you agreed to that language being used in the Government's update in September 2024?

Natalie Don-Innes: Yes, because I cannot determine what will happen in a parliamentary calendar. I cannot tell what will happen with other legislation or Opposition—

The Convener: So, there is uncertainty about this still—

Natalie Don-Innes: —requests for statements or time in the chamber that is devoted to other things.

The Convener: So, there is uncertainty about the bill now.

Natalie Don-Innes: I do not believe that there is any uncertainty, because I think that we are further on now. Mr Ross, I believe that you said that that update was from September, and I think that we are now further on and that we have more of an understanding of the landscape in relation to legislation and parliamentary scrutiny going forward. I do not believe that that is uncertain—

The Convener: But you cannot give us any more detail—

Natalie Don-Innes: I have assured—

The Convener: You say that we are further on, but you cannot tell us how much further on, because you cannot give us any more detail about when we will see the bill, other than that it might be just before the Parliament goes into summer recess.

Natalie Don-Innes: I have given you the detail that I can give you.

The Convener: Okay. Thank you.

I will hand back to Ms Duncan-Glancy.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I have questions about the specifics of what will be in the bill. Do you intend that the bill will address the need of care-experienced people for lifelong support?

Natalie Don-Innes: Yes, I am looking into that.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: So, the bill could include support for—

Natalie Don-Innes: It could, yes. I am considering that at the moment—based on a lot of

the responses to that specific consultation—because I know about the work that has been done in that regard. I have also heard from care-experienced people about the importance of lifelong support, because things can happen later in life that they might not have considered and that can bring trauma back. I appreciate that, and I am looking at that, yes.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Will the bill include anything on virtual schools?

Natalie Don-Innes: Will Ms Duncan-Glancy elaborate on that question? I am aware of the very good work that has been done in relation to our virtual school network—I have visited two or three virtual schools, and I have heard about the really positive outcomes that they are achieving—but what would Ms Duncan-Glancy like to see in the bill in that regard?

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I hope that the bill has progressed slightly further than the point of suggesting new areas to be included. We used to have 21 virtual schools in Scotland; I think that we have 18 now, so there has been a reduction, but they have been shown to be quite successful in relation to outcomes for care-experienced people. Does the minister feel that it would be appropriate to include something on that in the bill?

Natalie Don-Innes: That is not something that we are looking at for inclusion in the bill, but I continue to encourage the implementation of virtual schools with local authorities. Indeed, after my last visit to a virtual school, I asked why we do not have a virtual school that is accessible to pupils across Scotland. It is something that I am actively working on, aside from the bill. I do not feel that legislation is necessarily required for it, but I think that we can make progress by showing the outcomes that the virtual schools and the virtual headteacher network are having for pupils.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Thank you.

10:00

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): Good morning, minister. I want to stick briefly with the bill in the first instance. Can you confirm whether anything in relation to the bill has gone to the Cabinet sub-committee on legislation yet? Or is the sub-committee still awaiting a paper on it before it goes to the Cabinet?

Natalie Don-Innes: No, it has not gone to the Cabinet sub-committee on legislation.

Ross Greer: I might circle back to the legislation issue.

I note that the Government is taking forward its intention to set up a national social care agency. Can you clarify your involvement in that as the

minister with responsibility for the Promise? I know that it is primarily being taken forward in another portfolio, but what involvement and engagement do you have in that process?

Natalie Don-Innes: I regularly meet colleagues on workforce issues, which obviously stretch across several ministerial portfolios. We are also taking a cross-Government approach through the Cabinet sub-committee on the Promise, and the issue has been discussed there, too.

I am actively involved in the discussions on the agency. It does not necessarily sit with me, but I have been keen to push the fact that I very much understand the need to improve, support and grow the workforce. I believe that the national social work agency is a key part of that. I have been very supportive of it, and we will continue to be involved in discussions on it.

Ross Greer: Do you know whether the key stakeholders in this area—primarily care-experienced young people—have been involved in the discussions that the Government has led so far on setting up the social care agency? I know that the proposal is relatively advanced—the expectation is that the agency will be set up in spring next year—but I presume that discussions will be under way on the policy development work ahead of that. Have care-experienced young people and other stakeholders in the Promise space been involved in that?

Natalie Don-Innes: I am sorry, but I am not involved in policy development with regard to the agency. I will bring in Iona Colvin to talk about some of the engagement in that respect.

Iona Colvin (Scottish Government): There are two elements to this, the first of which is the national social work agency itself. In that respect, we have been looking at how we involve people with lived experience of social work, as the agency will cover social work right across the piece—in justice, in adult care, in mental health care, in children and families, and in addiction services. We are looking at that just now.

All along, we have involved social workers themselves—the people at the front line of service delivery—and we also have a policy panel that connects with front-line social workers. That work has been going on, and we are looking at involving the third sector and the Scottish Social Services Council in some work around how we reach out further.

The agency is all about how we work across Government to better support the implementation of the policy that the Government wants to be put in place through the legislation. To do that, we will form a national partnership with COSLA, Social Work Scotland, in particular, and the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior

Managers. It is about translating policy into delivery and ensuring that we have a proper workforce plan, because that does not exist at the moment. After all, the employers that we are talking about are 32 local government agencies, as well as some in the third sector, particularly in children's services. There are a number of qualified social workers working in the big charities that you heard from a while ago. We are all engaged in that work, and there is good support for the creation of the national social work agency and the partnership, which will involve local government in delivery.

Ross Greer: From what I have heard so far, engagement with social workers has been really good, and you have confirmed as much this morning. However, can you clarify whether care-experienced young people have been involved in any of the discussions thus far?

Iona Colvin: Not specifically in relation to the agency yet, but we do intend to involve people.

Ross Greer: I understand that the agency will be a couple of steps removed, but it is important to ensure that all key stakeholders are able to contribute.

Iona Colvin: It is absolutely important. One of the biggest workforce issues, particularly in children's services, is the turnover of social workers. Indeed, recent research shows very clearly that the more social workers a child or young person has, the worse the outcome is. Therefore, it is all about relationships and having adults you can trust, who support you and who will advocate for you. The issue that you have raised is important, and we will engage with those young people.

I should also say that we have been through a bit of a protracted process in relation to the national social work agency itself, as it was linked to the national care service.

Ross Greer: Given that it was originally linked to the National Care Service (Scotland) Bill and that the bill has changed quite significantly, do you expect there to be any need for legislative change in relation to the set-up of the social work agency and how it interacts with care-experienced young people? Is there any prospect of anything related to the social work agency coming into the scope of the Promise bill?

Iona Colvin: There is in terms of social work itself, because, if we look at extending rights to support, for example, we need to think about who is going to provide that support. It will not be the agency itself. The Care Reform (Scotland) Bill will establish the national chief social work adviser post, and the social work agency is related to that.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): I want to talk about social work services, following on from what Ross Greer has said. Is the social work experience for care-experienced young people a crisis-only service? In other words, is the service able to fulfil only its statutory responsibilities?

Natalie Don-Innes: I do not believe so. I understand the pressures that the social work workforce is under, and we are taking a number of steps to support them. We have alluded to the national social work agency, and I have spoken about inconsistencies and different experiences for different children and young people, which our work to support the workforce seeks to improve.

Willie Rennie: The evidence that we have had contradicts that.

Natalie Don-Innes: Okay.

Willie Rennie: We have had evidence from some senior people in the social work service, as well as from care-experienced young people. This very week, on Monday, we had a session with care-experienced young people who told us about this.

Ben Farrugia from Social Work Scotland said:

"If someone seeks support but there is not a crisis, we cannot get to them."—[*Official Report, Education, Children and Young People Committee*, 4 December 2024; c 60.]

In my constituency, I had a case in which a young man's family were pleading for a long time for early intervention, and the case eventually ended up in crisis and a secure unit because the intervention was not provided early enough.

On Monday, we heard that, if a young person has been in crisis but has moved on from it, social workers are encouraging the family to say that the person is still in crisis, just to get the basic level of support.

Those are three examples from three well-grounded people. Why do you say that it is not a problem?

Natalie Don-Innes: I did not say that it is not a problem. I said that I recognise the pressures that the social work workforce is under, and we are taking steps to support them and to improve that picture.

I will bring in Iona Colvin in a second, but I want to speak about some of the things that we are doing to provide support. We have alluded to the national social work agency. We have also delivered improvements to funding for student social workers, and we are working at pace to deliver a new work-based professional social work qualification in the academic year 2025-26. We are making improvements to the system to support learning and development, and a supported year for newly qualified social workers has been rolled

out to provide support in the first year through some people with experience who can help.

I can speak more on those things, but that is a high-level overview of some of the steps that we are taking to improve things in the social work workforce. Perhaps Iona Colvin could expand on that a little.

Iona Colvin: I recognise what you are saying, Mr Rennie. There are definitely pressures on the provision of resources at times. We also need to remember that the approach is about getting it right for every child at the point of need, which is also variable. It should not always have to be social workers who respond, but it sounds as though the cases that you are talking about are at a high-end level, so they should have been involved.

There are also pressures because we have major vacancies in the workforce, particularly in more remote and rural areas. There are significant challenges in the workforce because we do not have enough social workers. First, we are not recruiting enough social workers. The minister mentioned the things that we are doing, such as working with universities through an education partnership to ensure that the pipeline of social workers is coming through them.

Secondly, there is a retention issue. We know that something like 25 per cent of social workers are leaving six years after qualification. A couple of issues relate to that, the first of which is having immediate vacancies in teams. This week, I talked to a chief social work officer who had 40 per cent of posts vacant in the children and families teams. The second issue is the mix of experience. New social workers learn from their more experienced colleagues, and, following the pandemic, there has been an issue with the mix of experienced social workers and newly qualified social workers coming through, which has led to a rationing of social work time.

However, there is an absolute commitment in the social work profession to the delivery of the Promise—Ben Farrugia, Alison Bavidge and others clearly said that when they appeared before you. Several areas have massively transformed their services. I am thinking of Glasgow and North Lanarkshire, for example, and the Ayrshires, which have done some very impressive work, particularly around putting social work into schools and supporting children at an earlier stage. The problem is that it is not consistent enough. That is where the Promise framework will help us, because we will be able to see where it is working well or not working so well.

I would be happy to talk to you offline about specific examples, if you would like me to do so, and to see what we can work out. It would be

unusual for a child who has been in secure care to then be detached from social work support, so let me look into that.

Willie Rennie: The figures from the Scottish Association of Social Work survey were pretty stark and probably speak to why we have such a problem with retention: 50 per cent of social workers said they were dissatisfied and 32 per cent said that they were prone to emotional outbursts, including crying, weekly. The situation is pretty stark, and I can understand why there is such a leakage from the profession. I really want to get more information about the joint workforce improvement plan. How is it coming along?

Iona Colvin: The minister has talked about what we are doing around students as well as to support newly qualified staff. On where we are with COSLA and our local government partners, I am hoping that a report that looks at that joint plan will go to COSLA leaders next month. We will then consult on our top strategic priorities.

The workforce—which is not a Scottish Government but a local government one—is absolutely the top strategic priority for everybody, so we need to work together. We have the levers on the education side and the social work side. We are also working with Skills Development Scotland to introduce a graduate apprenticeship, which means that lots of people with lots of experience—for example, social work assistants who have been doing the job in different contexts—will be able to apply to become graduate apprentices and to get qualified. That is particularly important for remote and rural areas, which can bring staff in on that basis and then train and support them.

We are also looking at how we will develop a workforce plan. We are doing a test of change with local government just now to look at how we can get a good workforce plan that captures the needs of all 32 local authorities—we are talking to SallyAnn Kelly about the third sector as well—which will then allow us to plan properly. I know that we are not in the best place with that planning just now. We know a lot more now about the workforce and its movement than we knew three or four years ago, but we still need to put solutions in place.

We have focused on that work together, and I think that the national social work agency and the partnership will mean that there is more impetus towards it. There will be a formal agreement with local government around priorities, how we will do it and who will do what, which will give clarity and ensure that we hold each other to account for the delivery of that work—because, although it is councils' workforce and not ours, we need to help them to be able to do it. We all know that none of

us has all the solutions and levers here, so we must do that work in partnership.

10:15

Willie Rennie: Minister, you said in your opening comments that we are “on course”, but, looking at the figures, I do not think that we are. We are way behind. We are five years into the programme and eight years on from the start of the review, but we are just talking about setting up these bodies and having these plans. Surely you cannot say that we are on course.

Natalie Don-Innes: I believe that we are on course. I appreciate that we have faced pressures and difficulties. As I said, we have faced some significant barriers as a result of the pandemic and the cost of living crisis. However, I still believe that we are absolutely on course to deliver the Promise by 2030. Iona Colvin and I have spoken about the work that we are doing to support, retain and add to the social work workforce, and other things are under way across the Government that will bolster and support that work. As Iona said—obviously, I am not referring to the specific examples that you gave, Mr Rennie—sometimes, a social work interaction might not be what is required.

The work that we are doing on whole-family support is instrumental, and the First Minister has given it priority in the programme for government. I do not need to rehearse the lines about prevention and getting to families earlier. However, understanding families’ local needs in specific areas, getting to them before crisis points and intervening at appropriate times will definitely ease the need for a number of organisations to provide intensive support in later years.

I appreciate that that work is on-going, but I am not saying that it is for the long term, because we are taking action in that respect now. We must look across the board at a number of things that the Government is doing, over and above the specific work relating to the workforce, that will help to deliver the Promise.

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): The approach to the national care service has been a disaster, and that is the reason why we do not have a national social work service up and running and carrying out the reforms that we all want. If we are being honest, surely that is why the Government has failed to progress what should have been progressed much earlier in this session of the Parliament. I am not saying that the minister is responsible for that, but the reforms that we are talking about sat with the national care service, which the Government has failed to deliver. Is that not a clear account of why the reforms have not been made?

Natalie Don-Innes: There have, of course, been difficulties with the national care service, but I cannot speak about them today, because responsibility for that bill does not sit with me.

I appreciate what Mr Briggs has said about the delays, but I hope that we have assured him that action is being taken at pace to establish the national social work agency, and I have spoken about some of the other areas of work. However, I agree that difficulties with the national care service will impact the Promise. There were compelling reasons why reform of children’s services should have been considered alongside wider social care reform. That would have helped us to take a multi-agency approach, join up services and ensure that services talk to one another. I agree that the issues with the national care service bill have had an impact in a number of areas, but we are taking action at pace to remedy those and implement changes as quickly as possible.

Miles Briggs: The timing of the delivery of the national social work agency has been put back years, because the agency sat in the national care service bill. I know that different ministers are responsible for those things, but the delays have had an impact. We are now at the midpoint at which the Promise should have been delivered, but all the hard work on social work is just starting. Given the problems that we face in my region, especially in the capital, social workers tell me that they have been waiting for that. I do not think that it is satisfactory that progress is being made only at the end of this session of the Parliament. The Government needs to be honest with the sector and with the people we meet that the Promise might not be delivered by 2030 because the Government has not done the work.

Natalie Don-Innes: Mr Briggs, you said that the work on social work is just starting, but that is not the case. The creation of a national social work agency is one very important aspect of our work in supporting the workforce, but Iona Colvin and I have alluded to work in a number of other areas that is not just starting but has been worked through and progressed over a number of years.

I appreciate that there have been delays relating to the national care service. Difficulties were raised from members across the Parliament as we have sought to get the bill over the line. However, I can speak only about the work that we are progressing to make the changes that are needed to support the workforce.

Iona, do you have anything to add on timescales?

Iona Colvin: I have two brief things to add. First, we are working at pace, certainly in relation to students and newly qualified staff. We are also discussing how to support the workforce in

localities so that people stay on as social workers. A lot of things do not exist for social work that exist in, for example, health professions.

Secondly, we are five years on from the pandemic, but we should not underestimate the impact that it has had on children and young people. I know what the impact has been because, last Thursday morning, I discussed with chief social work officers the complex impacts on children and young people. There are a number of issues to consider, such as the complexity in how we interact with those who have neurodivergent issues and, in particular, young women who have eating disorders. Many chief social work officers will have previously seen that level of complexity, but the numbers would have been lower. They say that such complex issues require, in many ways, complex solutions.

The pandemic has also had an impact in people leaving the workforce. We could not have foreseen the pandemic, but we have watched its impacts.

We should recognise that the number of children who are in care has significantly reduced. The workforce understands the Promise and what we are trying to achieve, and many of them have gone the extra mile to do that. Many are doing the best that they can to fulfil the Promise. There has been transformation in certain areas against a difficult context and background.

George Adam: There is much talk about delivering the Promise by 2030. I recently sponsored an event for the oversight board on the publication of its third report, which we all attended. The report stated that, although we are halfway to 2030, we are not halfway to delivery, and it mentioned some of the reasons for that, such as the pandemic and the cost of living crisis. However, the board said in that report that we can still deliver the Promise by 2030 if we roll our sleeves up and start to focus on that. Minister, is it not the case that, if the people who are marking your homework say that you can still do it, you still have a good chance of being able to get there?

Natalie Don-Innes: Absolutely. That takes me back to the fact that we all have a responsibility in delivering the Promise. The Government is working at pace to deliver our aims and priorities, but we need local authorities and a range of third sector organisations to put in effort, as I know they are. People are absolutely committed to delivering the Promise. However, some of the unforeseen issues that we have faced, such as the cost of living and the pandemic, have undoubtedly impacted not just the Government's work but people's living standards and situations.

I believe that, if we all take the actions that are needed to drive forward the change and progress that we want to see, we will deliver the Promise. I

am not saying that we can deliver the Promise by 2030; I am saying that we will deliver it.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: We have heard about the extent to which staff are going out of their way to do everything that they can, and I, too, thank them for everything that they are doing.

Unison has said that staff are working evenings, taking work home and burning out, which is not an environment that is conducive to a trauma-informed approach. What does the minister think about that? What engagement has she had with the trade unions, and will she commit to engaging with them on the workforce plan on the Promise?

Natalie Don-Innes: Trade unions are key partners. Just last week, I engaged with them on separate matters relating to the Promise. I regularly engage with social workers, and I am sorry to hear examples of specific difficulties. I have alluded to a number of different moves that the Government is making to provide support, because I know that social workers are dealing with extremely difficult and complex issues. As Iona Colvin has said, they are absolutely committed to delivering the Promise, which sometimes means that they go above and beyond their expected duties. I thank them for that commitment. I have set out a plan that will help to support the current workforce and add to it, so that work is spread more evenly and people do not have to work such long hours.

Iona, do you have anything to add?

Iona Colvin: We fully engage with Unison and the Scottish Association of Social Work—I think that the committee has heard from Alison Bavidge. I have spoken with Unison at some of its seminars. I have looked at the union's workforce charter, which we have discussed as part of our partnership discussions. When we consult on the top priorities for our strategy for the national social work agency, I am clear that Unison will lobby hard on all the significant issues that it has identified in its charter. You are absolutely right that staff are having to work overtime and at weekends, which is not a sustainable position. We need to work with our local government colleagues to put in place proper workforce plans so that we can support the workforce to support the people who need it and get the best outcomes for them. Unison is absolutely in the middle of those discussions.

Willie Rennie: Minister, on secure units, the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland wrote to you on 20 February. She was very concerned about what was described to her as "cobbled together provision" because of insufficient capacity in the system. She also highlighted a "two-tier system" in that, if you go through the courts, you are likely to get a place,

but if you go through the hearings system, you are not.

In the commissioner's letter, she asked you three questions ahead of your meeting with her on 13 March. Are you able to give us the details of the answers to those questions? Do you want me to go over what the questions were?

Natalie Don-Innes: If you could, please, Mr Rennie.

Willie Rennie: She asked:

"How many children in each of the last six months have been unable to be placed in secure care when a hearing authorised the placement and a CSWO determined that it was necessary?"

That was the first question. Do you want to deal with that one first, and then I can come to the other ones?

Natalie Don-Innes: Sure. The Scottish Government does not collect data on the number of children from hearings who are not allowed entry to, or are not able to enter, secure care. If a space was not available to a child who needed entry into secure care, intense discussions would take place between COSLA, the secure care centres, social workers and all the other relevant stakeholders to ensure that what was carried out would best suit the child's needs.

Willie Rennie: We do not have an answer to that first question, then.

The commissioner's second question was:

"What consideration is Scottish Government giving to national co-ordination of secure placements given the crisis the system is currently experiencing?"

Natalie Don-Innes: You will appreciate that, this afternoon, I will give a statement on secure care, in which I plan to give a little more detail on our response to the capacity issues that there have been in secure care.

Willie Rennie: We get limited time for questions following statements. Individually, we get about 45 seconds, so I hope that you do not mind giving us the answers now.

Natalie Don-Innes: Of course. As I said, discussions in relation to joint work on secure care are continuing with COSLA. What was the specific question? Was it about national referral?

Willie Rennie: It was about national co-ordination of secure placements.

10:30

Natalie Don-Innes: I will bring in Iona Colvin in a second. We are doing a number of things to try to improve the situation in secure care, but we are not considering that at the moment, because, as I said, given the work that we are currently doing to

overcome capacity issues and our planned work on the future of secure care, I do not necessarily believe that that would be required.

Willie Rennie: The commissioner's third question was:

"What steps is Scottish Government taking to ensure that sufficient secure beds, of sufficient quality, are available for the children who need them? When will this detailed information be made available to the Scottish Parliament for their scrutiny?"

Natalie Don-Innes: The detailed information will be available this afternoon, when I give my statement. I can assure Mr Rennie that every appropriate action has been taken to support secure accommodation providers that are facing capacity issues. There have been issues with St Mary's Kenmure, but those have now been dealt with. I visited St Mary's a couple of weeks ago to see the improvements and to understand what has taken place. We are looking at other ways to increase capacity and are working with COSLA. I will be more than happy to provide more detail on that in my statement this afternoon.

Willie Rennie: I was on this committee when, in your evidence on the Children (Care and Justice) (Scotland) Bill, you promised us that there would be sufficient capacity and that that would not be an issue.

Natalie Don-Innes: Yes.

Willie Rennie: But that has not happened.

Natalie Don-Innes: I am sorry that that has not happened, but the capacity issue is not a result of the legislative change resulting from the Children (Care and Justice) (Scotland) Act 2024. There have been various issues. I did not know about the issue at St Mary's at that time. There has been an increase in the complexity of cases and the support that is required, which sometimes means that not all beds can be utilised because a child might require more than one bed or more than one space. Discussions on cross-border placements are on-going, and there are also a number of unaccompanied children who are asylum seekers. A number of issues are related to the problem.

Willie Rennie: All of those things were possible because unexpected things are possible, but you promised us that that would not be an issue and it has been. You must have contingencies and additional capacity to cope with the unexpected, so why was that not put in place?

Natalie Don-Innes: As I said, we have been having those conversations. As you say, Mr Rennie, such situations can arise. We do not know what is going to happen tomorrow. I sat here and said—

Willie Rennie: There were no contingencies for such events. There was nothing.

Natalie Don-Innes: The capacity challenges are not a result of the 2024 act. When I was sitting here—

Willie Rennie: I never said that. I am saying that you promised that there would not be a problem, but there is a problem and you did not have any contingencies. That is clear because, if you had had contingencies, we would not be asking these questions today.

Natalie Don-Innes: I am going to provide a full update on the contingency measures, the discussions that have taken place and the actions that are being taken to ensure that that does not happen again.

Willie Rennie: That is not really good enough for the young people who need secure care.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind): I will move on to the subject of foster care and foster families. I have always had huge admiration for foster care and feel that it has been useful and successful, although I know that there has been the odd mishap along the way. When I was a councillor—which, I am afraid, is now about 20 years ago—Glasgow struggled to get enough foster families. There was a financial side to that and, sometimes, when a family could be found, that family was quite a long way away, which also became an issue.

What is your overall thinking about foster care and foster families? I understand that numbers are down from around 3,500 in 2020 to fewer than 3,000 in 2023. Do we have a big challenge there? What is happening?

Natalie Don-Innes: There are indeed challenges in relation to foster care. I have already referred to the consultation on foster care that we have undertaken, which aims to ensure that foster carers are supported in the way that they need to be and to ensure that foster care is fit for the 21st century.

We had a fair number of responses to the consultation, and we have undertaken extensive engagement with foster carers. I have been out with foster carers and have spoken to them regularly. In fact, just a couple of weeks ago, following the consultation, I was at an engagement event in Renfrewshire, and I heard about the challenges that foster carers face regularly. Independent analysis of the consultation response is under way. The consultation set out a vision for the future of foster care, homing in on the support that is required and on the unique skills and qualities of foster carers.

Aside from the consultation, I have heard about and witnessed different models of foster care in our communities. For example, several weeks ago, when I was at Barnardo's, I heard about an

innovative model that it is trialling called the mockingbird model, which aims to provide extended support to foster families. It is a sort of community for the foster family. I heard directly from the foster families, care-experienced young people and members of staff who were there about how transformational that model has been for their way of working and for the support that they have. I am looking into that, and it forms part of my response to the consultation and my work informing the forthcoming bill.

I absolutely appreciate that recruitment and retention is an issue. We are funding a national foster care recruitment campaign to drive up the number of foster carers. Coupled with the work that will follow the consultation, that will be instrumental in providing the right support and the right avenues for people entering into foster care and in ensuring loving homes for our children and young people.

John Mason: Do you think that the falling number is because of finance, in that people cannot afford to become foster carers? Is there too much bureaucracy? Is it a mixture of things?

Natalie Don-Innes: When I speak to foster carers, I hear about some of the challenges. They are dealing with an increasing number of really complex issues. I understand that finances are also an issue, and the Scottish Government is taking action on that through the Scottish recommended allowance. I appreciate, however, that there may still be concerns about that.

When I am out and about talking with foster carers and kinship carers, I hear loud and clear that, although money is of course important—I am not downplaying that—it is the wraparound support that is most important. It is a matter of ensuring that we get that right. Having somebody to pick up the phone to when there is a problem and getting respite are important.

Those are some of the issues that we are considering to inform what happens following the consultation and to inform the forthcoming bill.

John Mason: Kinship care has a much higher profile than it used to have, which is a good thing. Is there a sense that more kids are now in kinship care, and that fewer therefore need foster care, or are the two not related?

Natalie Don-Innes: For me, part of the basis of the Promise is to keep children at home where it is safe to do so. If that is not possible, I would say that the next best place would be with their family, as long as that is a safe and loving environment for them. I promote kinship care, which is very important and instrumental for our aims in delivering the Promise.

I have met kinship carers. Just last week, I was out in West Dunbartonshire with kinship carers, and I have had some very challenging conversations with them. They feel that there is a lack of support for them. Finances can be difficult but, although that is important, it always comes back to the need for wider support from local authorities and an understanding that, just because a child is placed with their family, that does not mean that everything is okay—there can still be complex issues. Equally, a carer might be elderly or have other needs, so it is about ensuring that we have wraparound support for those families. At the end of the day, if a child stays in a kinship care arrangement, they will not go through the organisations and responses that would be required to help them if they were not staying with family.

John Mason: One issue with foster caring in the past was that we did not have a lot of ethnic minority families doing it. Has that changed?

Natalie Don-Innes: I am sorry, but I will have to turn to officials for detail on that. I appreciate the member's point, which is important. Ensuring that we recruit a diverse range of foster carers to suit all children's needs will be part of the recruitment campaign.

Gavin Henderson: That has been an issue historically, as you know, Mr Mason. Part of the campaign will seek to promote foster care among ethnic minority families.

As you alluded to, the balance between foster care and kinship care is changing. Last year, kinship care placements exceeded foster care placements for the first time. Kinship care placements are more likely for ethnic minority families than is the case in a different culture or environment.

John Mason: If somebody has a relationship with a foster family or kinship carer, that might continue no matter what age they are, and I know that it has in some cases. On Monday night, some committee members met online with young care-experienced people of a variety of ages. In the group that I was in with Pam Duncan-Glancy, one of the issues that came up was the cut-off at 26. A lot of foster families and kinship care arrangements would not have a sharp cut-off at 26, but other parts of the care sector might. Can we address that, or does there have to be an age where we draw the line?

Natalie Don-Innes: That comes back to my earlier point about lifelong support and the need to ensure that people with care experience can access support wherever they require it. I imagine that that might be different from what Mr Mason is talking about, which is the situation in which a child has been with a foster family or kinship family

and will likely have built up a relationship—I have witnessed that on many occasions.

That might not be as easy to do with other arrangements, although I visited a residential home a few weeks ago, and people there spoke to me about how they had built relationships. It was quite a small home and there were not too many children in it at one time, so the staff had a strong ability to build and form relationships with the children and young people. I heard about examples of children and young people coming back and interacting with others who were there. That presents an example of what Mr Mason is referring to, in terms of building lifelong relationships. However, that is another angle that I am looking into to ensure that people get support when they need it, no matter what age they are.

Miles Briggs: I will follow up on the line of questioning on the differences between kinship care and fostering, and opportunities in that regard. We are seeing a loss of foster carers, with an 8 per cent drop last year. There is a lack of foster carers coming forward in Edinburgh specifically. A University of Stirling report that was published in September last year points to the stark implications of that. Concerningly, we are told that

“one in ten of children had five or more placements, and ten years after becoming looked after more than one in ten children were still, or again, in impermanent placements.”

What work has been undertaken to assess the impact of the different payments and support that are available for foster care and kinship care? Say, for argument's sake, that I fostered someone today in Edinburgh: I would be entitled to £25,000 in support. However, if I were to take in a family member under kinship care arrangements, support would drop to £8,752. Clearly, there is a very different system in place. What work is being undertaken to look at putting at the heart of the Promise the provision of support to the extended family to look after someone? Why has the support for that not, to date, been matched with other support that is available?

I know that that is a long question, but I wanted to set that out.

10:45

Natalie Don-Innes: I will do my best to answer it.

As I said in my previous answer, I fully appreciate the issues that kinship carers have brought to me—they are very challenging. I know that kinship carers feel that they are not necessarily getting the financial support that they are entitled to and that there is a discrepancy in that respect. I should say that we are carrying out a review of the Scottish recommended allowance;

indeed, I introduced that review, because I felt that it was important, given some of the challenges that I am hearing about in that respect.

As for the wider picture, there are also problems with kinship carers' ability to access benefits and so on. We have ensured that that is not the case in Scotland but, in the UK benefits system, there are problems with, for example, universal credit when it comes to recognising kinship care. I continue to engage with UK counterparts on that, and I know that my officials have been in discussions, too, to try to ensure that kinship carers can get at least what they are entitled to.

Mr Briggs says that even that might not be sufficient to meet their needs. As I have said, I have discussed the issue with kinship carers, and I am looking at it, but not strictly from a financial point of view; after all, the support piece is very important, too. I have spoken to, for example, kinship carers who are elderly and have not looked after a child in a long time, and their support needs are a little bit different from those of other families. Every family is different and complex. From what I have heard, such carers can sometimes feel a little bit abandoned, and that is something that we absolutely need to combat. When it comes to the financial and support aspects, I am looking to the Promise bill for those things, too.

Miles Briggs: Will the bill put things on the same legal footing, so that people are entitled to the same support? I find it ridiculous that we are desperate for foster families here in the capital, and we have grandparents who do not necessarily have the financial means to sustain a child. I do not understand why we have not corrected that situation. If the resource is there for fostering, why is it not there at the same level for kinship care? Surely, the priority is for the young person to get the best outcome. Is it because kinship care is on a different legal footing that that has not happened already?

Natalie Don-Innes: Mr Briggs will be aware that there are inconsistencies in kinship care itself, and in what some kinship carers are entitled to and what others are not. Over and above the disparity between kinship care and fostering that you have alluded to, there are other issues with regard to what kinship carers themselves are entitled to. There are also issues with definitions and legal matters. I am looking into how we can best support kinship carers, because I believe that they are fundamental to our delivery of the Promise.

Miles Briggs: I would like to see the detail of that, once we get the bill.

A number of witnesses have told the committee that children and families social work has a negative public perception; indeed, a number of

kinship carers have expressed similar concerns to me. A lot of that is about stigma, suspicion of reports and a concern about children in a kinship care setting being taken into care. Has the Government captured that suspicion of social work in the bill? Moreover, it was suggested to us that that might be putting off people from going into social work. Might measures such as a recruitment campaign be used to address some of those concerns?

Natalie Don-Innes: I have certainly heard those concerns before, and I am very aware of them. I will bring in Iona Colvin in a second, but I will say that I appreciate the member's points about our messaging in that regard. It is not strictly part of the Promise bill, but we can certainly continue to work on that.

That brings me back to some of the points that Iona Colvin made about ensuring that social workers have the experience that they require when entering the role and have people with experience to draw from. I do not know whether Iona has anything to add about recruitment.

Iona Colvin: We are working with our partners—in particular, the Scottish Association of Social Work and Unison—to look at the issues that Mr Briggs has raised. You will have heard from Alison Bavidge that one issue is that, in many areas, social work has a negative image because social workers do not have powers—they only make recommendations to legal bodies. Social workers have very little power in that sense, but they have power with regard to the recommendations that they make to sheriff courts, children's hearings, the Mental Health Tribunal for Scotland, the Parole Board for Scotland or wherever. They are basically asked to make assessments on behalf of us all.

The key point is that we want the Promise to be delivered safely. We do not want children to be left in difficult situations where they may experience harm. We are working with our partners to consider how we can present a more positive image of social work, which is about how social workers support people to get the best outcomes that they possibly can. In many instances, that happens. I know that members of the committee have been talking to a lot of young people with care experience and I have no doubt that some of those young people will have told you about the social workers—and particularly the residential staff—who have been really important in supporting them.

I have seen good examples of that. Last week, when I was in South Ayrshire for world social work day, I saw great examples of social workers working with foster carers to support families with huge complexity. A lot of good work is going on, and we are looking into how we bring those

aspects forward in relation to recruitment. However, we cannot duck the issue. Social workers are asked to make recommendations to panels and sheriff courts about whether people should be able to continue with the care of their children and whether somebody should go to prison. All those things are realities of the job. They sometimes make it difficult, but they are necessary.

Miles Briggs: Thank you.

Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): Thank you for all your responses so far. I have a couple of questions about the whole family wellbeing fund, but I will first go back to the question that was asked earlier about the delivery of social work support for young people and how they feel about it. As was mentioned, we recently had an online meeting with young people from across the country. One young man raised the fact that he was dissatisfied with the social worker who was dealing with him. That was not because of anything that the social worker did right or wrong but because they were not always available. According to what we were told, the social worker had apparently been unavailable for up to two months, but nobody had been appointed to take their place during that period.

What could that young man or whoever supports him locally do to try to address that problem?

Natalie Don-Innes: The longer-term impact of some of the measures that we have been discussing today will help, although that might not help the specific young person who you were speaking to. We would be happy to pick up discussions on individual cases—although perhaps not in the committee's time—so you are more than welcome to follow that up if you would like to do so.

Bill Kidd: That is extremely helpful—thank you. I know that it is difficult, and I am not having a go at social workers, but sometimes situations can cause a difficulty.

To go back to the whole family wellbeing fund, the committee has heard about the need for longer-term funding and funding certainty. We have heard that from those who are involved in delivering whole family support projects. You mentioned this earlier, but what consideration has the Scottish Government given to that and how might it be addressed?

Natalie Don-Innes: We have given a multiyear commitment to the whole family wellbeing funding, and we have increased that funding to children's services planning partnerships by £6.1 million this year. As well as providing an increase in funding, we have provided certainty in terms of multiyear funding. Having discussed that with children's

services planning partnerships, I know that that is absolutely fundamental. I completely understand that, if we are asking organisations to make transformational change on the ground that will have a long-lasting impact, there is a need for some certainty on their finances to ensure certainty with regard to staff and programmes of work, for example. I believe that the certainty was very well received.

Bill Kidd: I understand what you are saying, but will that provide transition support to organisations that are going to continue with the whole family wellbeing fund?

Natalie Don-Innes: Yes, absolutely. The whole family wellbeing funding is for just that purpose—to create transformational change and new ways of doing things to enable local authorities or CSPPs to revolutionise the way that they provide services. You will not be surprised to hear that I have been out making visits, and I have heard about some of the impacts that the new ways of working have had with regard to breaking down silos and barriers between departments in government. Of course, work has been done through the third sector, too, which has been key. I am very positive about the work that we are seeing as a result of the whole family wellbeing funding.

Bill Kidd: Will that also help with regard to the timescales within which people can deliver and, perhaps, transition completely?

Natalie Don-Innes: I believe so. I appreciate that there are difficulties, and I know that some areas are finding it to be more complex than others. That goes back to what we spoke about at the beginning of the meeting in relation to the Promise progress framework and sharing best practice across the country. Sometimes, things seem too difficult until you see how other people are doing it, and then that can have a really big impact. Really positive things are going on. We still have a way to go with regard to bringing about transformational change, but I know that it is happening and I have seen some of the benefits that it is having already.

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): Good morning. Witnesses who have been involved in the whole family support projects have told the committee that, in some cases, they are supporting families in which the child's school timetable could be just 15 minutes or a few hours a day, as an alternative to being excluded. I have received a few inquiries in my mailbox from parents and carers who are looking after children who are in that situation. They are desperate to ensure that they receive the help and the education that they need. What can be done to resolve the issue of children being given shortened timetables in lieu of exclusion, to ensure

that every child is given the best possible start in life?

Natalie Don-Innes: We need to understand that, in exceptional circumstances, a part-time timetable or a flexible approach might be needed to appropriately support a child or a young person who might have been out of school for days or months and to enhance their transition back into school.

However, I and the Scottish Government have been very clear that part-time timetables for a child or a young person who is returning from an exclusion should be used only in the short term, not for long periods, because that approach is an effort to transition children and young people back into school. That approach should be taken only in the short term, for a defined period, and aims and conditions should be recorded in a plan that will allow the child to transition back into the school day.

Jackie Dunbar: If a child has a shortened timetable, should the parent or carer expect the local authority to draw up a plan? Should that happen at the beginning?

11:00

Natalie Don-Innes: Absolutely—I believe that that should happen at the beginning. I believe that there should be an understanding of over how long that would take place, and whether 15 minutes would grow into an hour, three hours or whatever period may be right for that child. I believe that a plan should be in place for that child to ensure the journey of travel back to the school day.

I know of many cases where that is happening—to go back to virtual schools and virtual headteachers—and I have spoken to children who have made that transition back into school. However, I believe that a plan is important to ensure that that is effective and that everybody knows what is expected of them.

The Convener: Minister, what is your view on care-experienced young people and children being excluded from school?

Natalie Don-Innes: My view is that it should only be a last resort, and that other measures should be taken to support that child or find out what is happening in that child's life that is causing the reason that they would be excluded. As I said, I believe that it should be as a last resort.

The Convener: But the Promise says that it should end.

Natalie Don-Innes: As I said, we are working on progress towards supporting children and young people in their school day. We are

experiencing a number of issues in our schools, as the member will be aware, and the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills has just launched the relationships and behaviour action plan. We are taking a number of actions to try to reduce exclusions. Yes, if the Promise says that we are to end exclusions, that will have to be the case if we are to deliver on the Promise by 2030—

The Convener: It says

“end”

both

“formal and informal exclusion”

from education.

Natalie Don-Innes: I am saying that I would encourage headteachers to look at every other solution, whether that be things such as part timetables or removing children from the school but, equally, still ensuring that they are able to have an education and transition back into school. I do not believe that exclusions—

The Convener: So, do you think that exclusion should end completely, or that it should be a last resort and care-experienced children should, therefore, still be excluded?

Natalie Don-Innes: In order to deliver on the Promise, it will need to end.

The Convener: How do local authorities respond to that? What discussions have you had with local authorities about that?

Natalie Don-Innes: Again, I have probably been discussing such things with virtual headteachers in virtual schools, rather than with local authorities themselves. It would be the cabinet secretary who would discuss matters of attendance and issues around that with COSLA.

I am more than happy to take that away, but, as I have said, I believe that there is support in place and that the school should look to support the pupil and understand the reasons for their behaviour or whatever it is that has led to them being considered to be excluded, and that all possible avenues should be explored before that decision is made.

The Convener: Are you aware of the paper that is going to North Ayrshire Council today?

Natalie Don-Innes: No, I am not—sorry, Mr Ross.

The Convener: It is looking at exemptions for care-experienced learners from the policy on school exclusion, and the recommendation from officers to council is that the option to exclude from school as a last resort should be retained. That would be contrary to what the Promise seeks to do.

Right now, today, on 26 March 2025, we have local authorities in Scotland that are urging councillors—it is council officers who have written the paper to urge councillors—to support a policy that would not be in line with the Promise.

Natalie Don-Innes: Well, I imagine that, as we work to deliver the Promise and we provide appropriate support for children and young people, and we keep more children at home, more children would have less reason to act out or engage in behaviour that would mean that they would be excluded from school.

That is in line with our work to deliver on the aims of the Promise. However, I am not aware of the council paper that you have brought to me, convener. I am more than happy to go away and look at that, and to discuss it with officials and look into what action can be taken around that.

The Convener: Does it not go back to the point that several members have been making about progress on the Promise? You say that there is good progress, that things are working and that we are going to get to a stage at which the Promise is delivered, but years on from the inception of the Promise, local authorities are still coming up with policies that would be contrary to it.

Natalie Don-Innes: I think that that goes back to my position around inconsistencies with local authorities and the need to really drive best practice forward across all 32 authorities. If discussions have to be had around how best to enact practice around exclusions, that can absolutely be taken forward.

We are in 2025, and there is still a way to go—

The Convener: Do you think that North Ayrshire Council would be wrong to approve the paper today?

Natalie Don-Innes: I have not seen the paper, Mr Ross, so I am not going to say yes or no.

The Convener: Would it be wrong to approve that recommendation? I can read the recommendation. It states:

“approves the recommendation that the option to exclude from school as a last resort should be retained”.

Natalie Don-Innes: I am sorry, Mr Ross, but I do not know the context behind it, so I am not going to give you a yes or no answer. I have assured you that I will go away and look at it. I do not believe that it fits with the ethos of the Promise and, as I said, if conversations or discussions need to be had around that, I will absolutely have them.

The Convener: Mr Henderson, do you want to say anything? I see that you do not.

I call Willie Rennie.

Willie Rennie: Minister, did you know what the Promise said on exclusion?

Natalie Don-Innes: Yes.

Willie Rennie: Because you said earlier that it is “a last resort”, and then you changed your mind to say that it should never be used. Why did you change your mind?

Natalie Don-Innes: No—I said that it is a last resort at the moment, and I believe that the work—

Willie Rennie: At the moment?

Natalie Don-Innes: I believe that the work that we are carrying out to deliver on the aims of the Promise, in supporting children and young people, will lead to children and young people having happier lives. I believe that the work that we are undertaking to tackle poverty will lead to children and young people having happier lives, and I would hope that, by 2030, when we are supposed to have delivered on the Promise, there will be fewer reasons for children to behave in ways that would see them being excluded from school.

There are other reasons that children are not in school, over and above behaviour, and those need to be considered, too. As I said, I am considering further work on that as a result of this discussion.

Willie Rennie: Right. There were a lot of words there, but I was really just asking this. You did not seem to be aware of what the Promise said—I think that was pretty obvious to everybody.

Natalie Don-Innes: Well, I was, Mr Rennie—sorry, but you are incorrect on that point.

The Convener: Excuse me, minister—I will ask you to review the *Official Report* and the recording of this meeting. I had to read out the Promise to you because, without any prompting from me, you used the words “last resort”. I would welcome the opportunity for you to review the *Official Report* of today’s meeting and the recording of the meeting to see if that could perhaps be the case.

I certainly took a similar opinion to Mr Rennie: it sounded like you thought that the Promise suggested exclusion as a last resort. That may be why councils are doing what I have described, if that is the guidance that they are getting from the top.

I go back to Mr Rennie.

Willie Rennie: Minister, you will have seen or heard, or read, the evidence that some third sector organisations gave to us about the 15-minute timetable. The clear indication from them was that that was all that those young people were getting—just the 15 minutes—in some cases.

Did you speak to those charities to find out more about their evidence?

Natalie Don-Innes: I have not spoken to them directly on the issue, but I am more than happy to do so.

Willie Rennie: Okay. It was pretty stark evidence, and if I was the minister, I would be straight on the phone and I would want to know why the 15-minute timetable was used as a dodge to make sure that there were no exclusions, because a 15-minute timetable with no wraparound support is a dodge. Why did you not phone them?

Natalie Don-Innes: I can bring in my officials in a second to speak to any further engagement that may have taken place. However, Mr Rennie, there are a number of things that cross my desk on a daily basis that I would have to say are, at times, decisions for either local schools or local authorities to make—

Willie Rennie: So this is not important.

Natalie Don-Innes: —on which I cannot necessarily have a direct impact, if such a decision has been taken.

As the Government minister, I am here to direct policy and—of course—to try to convey the ethos of the Promise and ensure that local authorities are signed up to it. We have heard clearly today that there is a real drive from local authorities, from the third sector and from a number of organisations in delivering the Promise. As I said, I have been very clear about my thinking around 15-minute timetables and how they should be used as a transition to go back into school, but I am more than happy to have further discussions on these matters.

Willie Rennie: Has anybody phoned them?

Natalie Don-Innes: Gavin, would you like to come in?

Gavin Henderson: We can engage on this with our education colleagues and maybe write to the committee.

Willie Rennie: Okay. So, as far as we are aware, minister, in preparation for this evidence session, a pretty critical piece of evidence that was given to the committee in a previous session has not been followed up, even though it is central to the exclusion policy—on which I do not think that you were very clear. That does not inspire us with confidence that you are really on top of this.

Natalie Don-Innes: Well, I am sorry that you have got that impression, Mr Rennie, but, as I said, there are a number of wide-ranging aspects in the Promise. I really have nothing further to say—I think that I have been very clear on my priority and my emphasis on driving this forward.

Willie Rennie: You have.

Natalie Don-Innes: I will pick up those further conversations.

I have made it very clear that keeping the Promise is all about a cross-portfolio approach, and a number of areas—education, housing, health and justice—all have a responsibility. I will, of course, look into the concerns with regard to that specific case, but it is for all of us in Government to drive forward the changes that are required to deliver on the Promise.

The Convener: I call Pam Duncan-Glancy.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: The Promise is, of course, a cross-Government commitment, and we have heard this morning about the discussions on the proposed bill at Cabinet. What discussion has the minister had with the education secretary on the issue of exclusions and care-experienced young people in education? When did she last discuss it?

Natalie Don-Innes: If you are talking about formal discussions, I do not have that information at the moment. However, I assure the member that it is something that I discuss regularly with the cabinet secretary.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: How recently, roughly, have you discussed it?

Natalie Don-Innes: I can come back to the member with that information, if she likes.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Okay. That would be helpful, given that the outcomes for looked-after children and young people in education, which were published last year without much attention being drawn to them—

Natalie Don-Innes: In fact, I can give the member the information that she is looking for. I last discussed the issue of attendance on the record with the cabinet secretary last Thursday during a portfolio call.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Last Thursday. Did you discuss attendance and, specifically, care-experienced young people?

Natalie Don-Innes: We discussed attendance and, specifically, care-experienced young people. I think that the discussion went into virtual schools and the virtual headteacher network, too.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: During that call, did you discuss together the outcomes that showed that less than half of young people with care experience have even one national 5 qualification on leaving school, are several times less likely to be able to access higher education and are even less likely to know what they will do when they leave school, and that the numbers are getting worse?

Natalie Don-Innes: We did not discuss that in that exact call, but, as I have said, I have discussed that previously with the cabinet secretary. The member will also be aware that work is under way with Education Scotland, COSLA and the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland to develop and agree meaningful outcomes in relation to the education ask in the Promise. It is something that we are working on. I appreciate the concerns about those statistics, but please be assured that those conversations are taking place.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Are similar conversations happening with the Minister for Further and Higher Education?

Natalie Don-Innes: In relation to the outcomes? Absolutely. The Minister for Further and Higher Education was involved in that call, too.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Okay—thank you.

John Mason: Minister, to go back to Jackie Dunbar's question, do you feel that whole-family support is consistent across the country? For example, there is a school in my area that has a number of pupils whose families do not have a close relationship with it, and it has used pupil equity funding to bring in the third sector to build up those relationships. Obviously, social work is involved, too, with social workers sometimes taking a child out of class because they need to speak to them about whatever. Do you feel that the national approach is joined up enough, or is it better to leave it to those who are involved in individual situations to provide whole family support in the way that they think is best?

Natalie Don-Innes: I do not think that the approach is joined up enough at the moment. Indeed, part of the First Minister's priority in that respect is to ensure that there is more of an understanding of how to implement it at a local level, and that such understanding is on a national basis so that there is no inconsistency in practice. The most recent budget set out the next steps towards our commitment to introducing more flexibility in how key services can be designed, funded and delivered. As you point out, there are inconsistencies, but work is being driven forward to try to improve things at a local level.

John Mason: I accept that PEF is not exactly in your remit, minister, but the good thing about it is that it allows the local headteacher to focus resources where they feel that those are most needed. Would you like to see the approach of focusing resources on the neediest areas continue?

Natalie Don-Innes: Of course.

Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I thank the convener and the committee for letting

me attend today's meeting, and I thank the minister for her very interesting answers. I am sure that the care community will be very relieved to hear the minister definitively state, in response to Mr Adam, that the Promise will be met by 2030. I am looking forward to that.

My questions are on the redesign of the children's hearings system. The "Children's Hearings Redesign—Consultation Analysis" report, which was published in February, said that 74 per cent of the people who responded thought that there should be a paid position for the redevelopment of the system. That came out of 500 hours of consultation and 12 sessions in which young people were involved from the beginning. Is there going to be a paid position for the redesign of the children's hearings system?

11:15

Natalie Don-Innes: I was presented with a number of options on that specific ask. Personally, I think that some form of remuneration will be required to ensure the robustness of the system, and I am considering that for the forthcoming bill.

Roz McCall: Thank you. If that is something that you are definitely considering, that is good to hear. As we heard earlier, relationships are really important for the care-experienced community, and continuity is essential. Will the redesign follow the format that has been laid out by the Promise board under its process? Can you give us any additional information on that?

Natalie Don-Innes: I do not know if Gavin Henderson has any detail on that.

Gavin Henderson: The minister is considering those issues for inclusion in the proposed bill.

Roz McCall: My concern comes from the fact that, although the minister has already stated that the issues with secure care are not related to the Children (Care and Justice) (Scotland) Act 2024, we know that the legal process is utilising care facilities as a sort of "young offenders institution lite". That process is squashing the problem down, which is why we have those issues on the care side.

I am looking forward to hearing the minister's statement to Parliament later, and I do not want to pre-empt any of it. However, I stress that any delays in coming forward with the revamp of the hearings process only add to the concern. How smooth will the process be with regard to the forthcoming bill? We heard questions earlier about not having a timeframe for when the bill will be introduced, but we have an assurance that it will be coming later this year. How smooth a process will there be? Which recommendations for the

hearings system from the Promise board are being accepted and carried forward in the bill?

Natalie Don-Innes: I can give you that detail when the details of the bill are produced, but I cannot go into that level of detail at the moment, while those things are still being considered and certain aspects are still being worked out with law officers, going through the regular process. I would have to update you on that at a later date.

Roz McCall: I accept that—I am just nervous that any delay to the design will be having a knock-on effect on children right now. I look forward to any updates that you can give us on that process, and any timeframe for the bill would be greatly appreciated.

I also have a question on the definition of “care experience”. That has not been mentioned at all today, but it is a very important part of the process. If care experience is not clearly defined, how do we know that we are doing the job correctly for our young people? Where are we on the definition? Does it include adoption, and how will that affect adult adoptees?

Natalie Don-Innes: That is something else that we consulted on, and we are still analysing the responses. It was clear that people wanted a broad definition of care experience that encapsulated the vast range of different experiences that people with experience of care may have had. It will be fundamental, in that some aspects of access to services and so on are reliant on care experience. I will bring in Gavin Henderson to say a little more about the work that has been done since the consultation closed.

Gavin Henderson: We are considering that for the forthcoming bill; it is something that the care community have asked for via the Promise. There is currently no definition in statute of “care experience”. For the care community, one element of asking for a definition is validation of that status, with an understanding of what flows from it and the package of support that the state will provide to someone who has experienced that set of circumstances. We understand the importance of having a definition in law in terms of support for young people, and we understand what that means for how we support people.

Roz McCall: I am sorry to come back on that, Mr Henderson. I understand why we need a definition, but I want to find out how we are progressing with the definition. Will that include adoption, including adult adoptees?

Gavin Henderson: We are looking at that in relation to the bill, and we will announce that when the bill is introduced.

Miles Briggs: How might the principles of good transition be included in the bill? The committee

has heard from a number of individuals who highlighted the fact that many councils have decided that care orders will be lifted at the age of 16, which means that the support that will previously have been available to people will no longer be available. As we have heard, that can be very much a cliff edge for someone at the age of 16. I wonder what opportunities the bill presents to look at those principles, and specifically the opportunity to reconsider 16 as the age for lifting compulsory supervision orders. I have concerns that, in many cases, councils have been using that approach to reduce their case load and, ultimately, to save money.

Natalie Don-Innes: That is disappointing, and I hope that decisions are not being made at a local level to save money when that will have a direct impact on the delivery of the Promise. If we deliver on the aims of the Promise, at the end of the day, there will be a huge saving for local authorities, so I really hope that those decisions are not being made on a financial basis.

As I have said, in relation to the forthcoming bill and support for care-experienced children and young people, things such as aftercare and advocacy are part of our consideration.

Miles Briggs: In the case of someone who goes down that pathway and has their CSO lifted, are you considering including a provision for them to appeal and to then go back to receiving support?

Gavin Henderson: There is a range of options with regard to the right support for young people. A compulsory supervision order might be terminated for good reason, but circumstances might change as a young person moves on. Of course—as I think that you are alluding to—a young person’s circumstances do not change just because they turn 16. The question is, therefore, how we provide avenues to ensure that our young people get the right support, even if they are over 16. The answer might not be to reimpose a compulsory supervision order, but the minister is considering a range of options for the bill.

Miles Briggs: I look forward to seeing the detail of those options.

The Convener: That concludes the committee’s evidence on the Promise. However, as we have you here, minister, I would like to raise a couple of other points. May I ask you, minister: do you respect this committee?

Natalie Don-Innes: Of course I do. I respect this Parliament.

The Convener: Okay. We are more than seven weeks on from the committee’s stage 1 report on the Schools (Residential Outdoor Education) (Scotland) Bill being presented to the Government

for your response, and we are a day away from a parliamentary debate and vote on the bill at stage 1. Why have you not even responded to the committee's report?

Natalie Don-Innes: I will respond to your report; I am still considering the bill itself. I appreciate that we are a day away from the debate. I met Liz Smith last week to discuss the Government's ongoing concerns about the bill, and I will respond to the committee in due course.

The Convener: Concerns about the bill are included in the stage 1 report; that would not prevent you from responding to the committee's work and to those who took the time to give evidence in both oral and written submissions. I do not believe that it is in any way respectful, not just to the members sitting around this table but to everyone who has been involved in the bill—the member in charge, the non-Government bills unit and, crucially, the people who gave evidence—that the Government is still, more than seven weeks after you were given the report, unable to give us its response to it. Do you honestly believe that for your response to come so late in the day will allow for a good debate tomorrow?

Natalie Don-Innes: I believe that—

The Convener: Do you think that we will have a good debate tomorrow with, potentially, less than 24 hours' notice of the Government's response to the committee's stage 1 report?

Natalie Don-Innes: I believe that we will have a good debate tomorrow, and I will, as I say, respond—

The Convener: I am sorry, minister—do you think that this is funny?

Natalie Don-Innes: No, I do not think that it is funny, Mr Ross—

The Convener: You are smiling—

Natalie Don-Innes: That is because you are saying that I have shown disrespect for the committee, whereas your own level of respect could be called into question as well—

The Convener: Minister—

Natalie Don-Innes: I am here to answer questions on the Promise, as I said. The session has gone over time by nearly an hour—

The Convener: No, we are—

Natalie Don-Innes: I have plenty of respect—

The Convener: Minister, minister—we are nine minutes over time. You were scheduled to be here until 11:15 today—

Natalie Don-Innes: Well, that is a miscommunication, then, because I was under the

impression that I was here until half past 10 today. I have another engagement, for which I am now late.

The Convener: I am simply asking you: do you think that it is respectful that, more than seven weeks after you were given our report, you have still not responded to it. Is that respectful?

Natalie Don-Innes: I apologise if you feel that it is disrespectful—

The Convener: I do—

Natalie Don-Innes: —that I have not responded to that report, but I will respond, as I said, as soon as I am able to.

The Convener: But the debate on the bill starts at 2 o'clock tomorrow afternoon.

Natalie Don-Innes: I do not have anything further to say, Mr Ross.

The Convener: So we will get the response between 11:25 on Wednesday and half past 2 on Thursday.

That concludes this evidence session. I thank you and your officials for your evidence this morning. I will pause briefly to allow our witnesses to leave, and the committee will move into private session to consider its final agenda items.

11:25

Meeting continued in private until 11:45.

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