



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee

Tuesday 25 November 2025

Session 6



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Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

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EQUALITIES, HUMAN RIGHTS AND CIVIL JUSTICE COMMITTEE
27th Meeting 2025, Session 6

CONVENER

*Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con)

*Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)

*Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP)

*Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)

*Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Anna Densham (Scottish Government)

Kaukab Stewart (Minister for Equalities)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Euan Donald

LOCATION

Committee Room 4

Scottish Parliament
Equalities, Human Rights and
Civil Justice Committee

Tuesday 25 November 2025

[The Convener opened the meeting at 10:00]

Decision on Taking Business in
Private

The Convener (Karen Adam): Good morning, and welcome to the 27th meeting in 2025 of the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee. We have no apologies this morning. Tess White will be joining us remotely.

Our first agenda item is a decision on taking agenda item 3 in private. Agenda item 3 is consideration of the evidence that the committee will take this morning in its inquiry on human rights, equalities and access to services in rural areas of Scotland. Do members agree to take that item in private?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Human Rights, Equalities and
Access to Services (Rural Areas)

10:00

The Convener: Our second agenda item is an evidence-taking session for our inquiry into human rights, equalities and access to services in rural areas of Scotland. This is our last formal evidence session in the inquiry. I welcome Kaukab Stewart, Minister for Equalities, who is accompanied by Scottish Government officials. Anna Densham is deputy director of land reform, rural and islands policy, and Trevor Owen is head of human rights strategy and legislation unit. You are all welcome, and thank you for joining us.

I invite the minister to make a brief opening statement.

The Minister for Equalities (Kaukab Stewart): We are grateful to the committee for the invitation to give evidence as part of the short inquiry into human rights in rural Scotland. I begin by acknowledging the role that rural communities play as part of Scotland's social and economic fabric. Rural Scotland accounts for 98 per cent of the country's landmass and around 18 per cent of its population. The Highlands and Islands region alone makes a huge economic contribution. In 2022, islands, remote rural and mainly rural areas accounted for about £42 billion, or 25 per cent, of Scotland's gross value added. Rural Scotland is central to Scotland's energy transition and home to some of our most innovative sectors, including the space, tourism and food and drink sectors.

Our rural communities have shown themselves to be dynamic and resilient and are well-placed to seize opportunities in feeding, powering and inspiring us all. However, I acknowledge the unique challenges that those communities face, including barriers in accessing public services and opportunities that are more readily found in urban areas. Those experiences shape daily life and can impact on how individuals can access and claim their human rights. The distances often mean long journeys to healthcare and education. Digital connectivity is improving but it still affects work, learning and participation. Economic activity can be seasonal. Costs are higher and housing scarce and costly, especially where demand for second homes is strong. Tackling those pressures needs approaches that are rooted in rural realities and that build on community strength and resilience.

I know that those and other issues were raised last week when the committee took evidence from organisations that are active in our rural communities. Similarly, the Scottish Human Rights Commission's report from last year on "Economic, social and cultural rights in the Highlands and

Islands” is an important intervention, as it reflects some of the experiences of people living across rural communities in the north of Scotland. The rights that it focuses on—health, housing and social security—are everyday rights. They go to the heart of decisions around public service delivery, quality and accessibility.

The report explores some of the challenges that I mentioned and examines them through the lens of international human rights law. It pioneers a new model of human rights monitoring in combining data with lived experience. Although the report acknowledges that it is not a definitive assessment of rights realisation in the Highlands and Islands, it is nevertheless an important reflection of lived experience in those communities, and it shows that there is more to do to ensure better enjoyment of rights equally across Scotland.

All those who are responsible for services in rural areas should use the report’s findings to drive improvement. In May, the Scottish Government responded, outlining actions that we are taking on the report’s eight recommendations and demonstrating progress to support better rights realisation for rural communities. That includes our forthcoming rural delivery plan, which will set out actions to address the distinct issues that are faced in rural Scotland, and our new national islands plan, which is guided by islanders to deliver thriving, sustainable and successful island communities.

Our progress is also reflected in investing in areas such as housing, where we are delivering 110,000 affordable homes by 2032, with at least 10 per cent in remote rural and island communities; digital connectivity, where our R100—reaching 100 per cent—contracts have already delivered 16 new fibre-optic subsea cables, providing resilient connectivity to 15 islands; and transport, where we fund initiatives to make transport affordable, including free bus travel for young people, disabled people and everyone over the age of 60.

However, we recognise that the journey is ongoing. Our intention to bring forward a new human rights bill in the next parliamentary session seeks to strengthen accountability and improve outcomes in everyday areas such as health and housing. That aims to bring economic, social and cultural rights closer to home so that communities, including rural communities, feel reflected in the decisions that duty bearers make. That is why I have been relentless in driving the Government’s ambitious agenda to ensure that equality and human rights are embedded in all that we do, which is supported by the imminent publication of an overarching mainstreaming strategy.

Thank you once again for the opportunity to attend today. I welcome your continued scrutiny and support for the work that we do together, alongside our national human rights institutions, to advance rights for all communities across Scotland.

The Convener: Thank you, minister. We will now move to questions, and I will kick off. It would be helpful for members of the committee to understand, given the vastness of the issues of rurality and their cross-cutting nature—this crosses a lot of portfolios—how you, as minister, have discussions on the issues with other ministers. How is the issue discussed at ministerial level and at civil servant level?

Kaukab Stewart: That is a good question. I have said on the record to the committee previously that I take seriously my responsibilities as Minister for Equalities to promote mainstreaming and provide support and challenge to my colleagues at Cabinet and ministerial level. I think that I have maybe just one or two colleagues who, due to diary commitments, I have not yet met, but that shows the extent of the progress that I have made since I first appeared in front of the committee to say that that is what I was promoting.

That has allowed me to get an overarching view of the connections across portfolios and to highlight those connections to my colleagues. Colleagues are very much aware of the cross-cutting themes. When I am trying to promote equality impact assessments and to raise their quality and embed them, that has helped a great deal. It has enabled me to not only look at overarching policy but to inform my colleagues so that, when they make decisions, they are considering those issues early on and bearing in mind all the cross-cutting themes such as housing. I have had good conversations with the cabinet secretaries responsible for rural areas such as the Highlands and Islands to highlight the mainstreaming agenda.

I hope that that gives the committee reassurance that that work has progressed very well. We should remember that this our first time doing this, so we are doing things differently.

The Convener: You touched on the SHRC’s report. Has the Scottish Government responded to it and, if so, how?

Kaukab Stewart: Our response to the SHRC was issued in May. We appreciate the work that the SHRC does and welcome its spotlight approach in raising the issues. The report clearly demonstrates the importance of all levels of government sustaining progress to advance people’s experience of human rights in rural and island communities. Our response, which we issued in May, outlined the breadth of work that

was already under way across the areas that were raised in the report. Our response also set out the actions that we are taking, or are planning to take, on each of the report's eight recommendations.

As I said in my opening remarks, I fully accept that there is more work to be done, but we are committed to working collaboratively across the public sector to ensure that we achieve our aim of making sure that everybody, regardless of where they live, has their human rights respected and fulfilled.

I know that the SHRC called for all relevant duty bearers to pay heed to its report, and we echo and fully support that call. People should be cognisant of it in designing and delivering public services for our rural communities. We will continue to work constructively with the SHRC, and other stakeholders, on the issues that were raised in the report and, more importantly, to implement the changes that are necessary to ensure further progress.

Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con): Good morning, minister. It is good to hear that your meeting with the cabinet secretary for health went well and that you discussed a number of cross-cutting themes. Which cross-cutting themes did you discuss? Is there anything that you would like to share with the committee?

Kaukab Stewart: I am sorry, Ms White, but I missed something there. Did you name a particular cabinet secretary?

Tess White: Yes—the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care, Neil Gray. You said that your meeting with him had gone very well and that you discussed a number of cross-cutting themes. What cross-cutting themes did you discuss with the cabinet secretary?

Kaukab Stewart: From memory, we discussed waiting lists, access to maternity services and local hospital provision—those are some of the issues that have been raised with me when out and about. As minister, I take my responsibilities across the board seriously and we are encouraged to visit Highlands and Islands communities to hear about issues first hand. One issue that was raised with me was about access to treatment, the distances that often have to be covered and the challenges that people face. That is an example of the issues that I was able to raise with the cabinet secretary.

Tess White: On waiting lists, Councillor Geva Blackett has said that, under the Equality Act 2010, it is unlawful to discriminate because of certain characteristics when you are being provided with a public service, such as health or social care. She said that the very first of those protected characteristics is age and the fifth is pregnancy and maternity, yet health and social

care is not equitably accessible to those living in remote and rural areas.

Were you able to drill down with the cabinet secretary on those two protected characteristics of age and pregnancy and maternity in relation to the Equality Act 2010, or was your discussion just a wide-ranging one on general treatment waiting times?

10:15

Kaukab Stewart: It was both. Part of my responsibility is to remind, support and challenge regarding the Equality Act 2010 and our public sector equality duty. We were able to discuss some issues that had been raised with me.

As I said, I fully recognise the distinct challenges that those living in rural areas sometimes face. I particularly recognise that intersectionality can often add a layer of inaccessibility. There is a disproportionate impact in the examples that you have given, and across other protected characteristics. It would be the same for ethnic minorities and disabled people, for instance. I am mindful of that, and the cabinet secretary is very mindful of it, too.

Tess White: Thank you.

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): Good morning. Thank you for joining us this morning.

Minister, you spoke earlier of the importance of engaging further with the SHRC and with other stakeholders. Of course, the third sector plays a vital role in delivering local services in rural areas. Those organisations often quite literally keep communities functioning and keep people well, and they are, therefore, very important stakeholders.

In the evidence that we have gathered, we have heard strong calls for partnership and meaningful engagement with third sector organisations and local communities as well as strong calls for parity of esteem—genuinely valuing third sector organisations as equal partners for the work that they do. Can you tell us a little bit more about how the Scottish Government currently engages with rural communities and the third sector organisations that provide such important services? Also, what improvements do you anticipate being made?

Kaukab Stewart: Meaningful engagement with rural stakeholders and communities at an early stage of policy development is absolutely vital. We continue to encourage engagement with rural and island communities across relevant portfolio and policy areas to understand their specific experiences of the issues in their localities—which of course can vary—in order to be able to develop

a more flexible and localised approach to delivery. That includes engagement through the Scottish Rural Network and direct consultation with island communities on the new national islands plan.

The islands community impact assessment and the rural assessment toolkit, which was launched in April, encourage that in a systematic way, supporting access to specific islands and rural data and offering channels for engagement where they do not already exist.

If you would like more information on that, I am happy to bring in Anna Densham. Before I hand over, though, I will just agree with your point about the vital role that third sector organisations play. I could not have said it better myself. Third sector organisations are essential. They know their communities. I am aware that around 34 per cent of voluntary organisations are based in rural and remote locations, despite only about 21 per cent of the Scottish population living in those areas. That demonstrates how important they are in those communities, and we absolutely value the essential role that they play. We acknowledge that the sector needs support, stability and the opportunity for longer-term planning. Anna Densham can give you more detail.

Anna Densham (Scottish Government): I will touch again on the role of the islands community impact assessment and the rural assessment toolkit that we have brought in. It is a form of rural proofing. To complement that, a lot of policy teams will have their own avenues and ways of engaging with rural communities to support their policy development and some of their on-going programmes.

We also have a series of programmes, not just in my area but in other portfolios across the Scottish Government, that provide community support for community-led development, which means that we have quite a range of relationships. Often, those programmes and relationships are linked and form part of the wider third sector picture. The minister has covered quite well what is happening on that front but I will add a couple of points.

I think that you will be aware that we are piloting a fairer funding approach, which is intended to bring back more multiyear funding. We know that multiyear funding is important for being able to plan and manage activities, build up volunteer capacity and so on.

This year, 51 grants totalling over £130 million have been provided through the fairer funding pilot and we hope that we can roll that out further across the third sector. However, there is a balancing act to be done, given the wider fiscal situation at the moment. I am happy to follow up

on anything more specific that you want to know about.

Maggie Chapman: Thank you both. Minister, you talked about the support and stability that are required by the third sector. The frustrations around single-year funding will not surprise anybody who has had any engagement with third sector organisations. They spend nine months doing the work and three months applying for funding. That does not give them stability and it does not provide service users with long-term stability or continuity. When organisations have to issue redundancy notices to staff because they do not know when or if Government funding is coming, it can utterly undermine the vital work that they are doing.

Anna Densham talked about the fairer funding pilot but we already know that multiyear funding works. We know that it is a good thing. There is already demonstrable evidence from so many different parts of the third sector that it provides exactly the support and stability that they need. We also know that the return on investment in the third sector is much higher than elsewhere in terms of value for money and delivering positive outcomes that track to work linked to the national performance framework and other things.

Therefore, how quickly can we move from that pilot to the full roll-out of multiyear funding? Also, in the meantime, how can you ensure that we are showing certain sectors within the third sector—for example, women's aid organisations, which were highlighted as being in particularly chronic need of support—that parity of esteem and showing them that you value them as you say you do?

Kaukab Stewart: Thank you for that. I agree and I am very sympathetic, as we all are in Government. It must be most frustrating. It is equally frustrating for us, because our budget is set on a cycle that comes from the Westminster United Kingdom Government. When that budget settlement is done yearly, it is difficult and challenging for the Scottish Parliament and Scottish Government to set multiyear funding. We can make decisions on fair pay, for instance, but then there are decisions at the UK level such as the national insurance contributions increase, which can have an enormous impact. It is incredibly frustrating that the benefits of our decisions cannot always be seen because of decisions that are made elsewhere.

The latest estimates indicate that, across Government, we have invested over £1 billion in the third sector in 2023. Anna Densham talked about the fairer funding pilot, which covers multiyear funding worth £130 million over 2025 to 2027. It is part of our commitment to prioritise and focus on the delivery of front-line services and on tackling child poverty. When you are doing a pilot,

you are including more and more organisations that you can support. This is not an exhaustive list but some organisations that are included in the pilot are Scottish Mountain Rescue—it is really important that it is part of the pilot—the Scottish Book Trust, which delivers the Bookbug programme, and the communities mental health and wellbeing fund, which is delivered across Scotland through third sector interfaces.

I acknowledge that it is frustrating, but the pilot is an important first step to mainstreaming multiyear funding agreements across the third sector to balance our ambitions against challenging financial decisions and the landscape that we are working in.

You mentioned women's aid organisations, Ms Chapman, and I can touch on that. The equally safe strategy specifically recognises that women in small rural and island communities can face particular challenges in relation to all forms of violence against women and girls; abuse can sometimes be even more hidden than in urban areas. To help address those issues, we fund vital support services across all parts of Scotland, including in the rural and island communities, through our investment of £21.6 million a year in the delivering equally safe fund. At least £5.4 million of the delivering equally safe fund is allocated to rural and island communities. That figure excludes rural areas within predominantly urban local authorities, so the actual amount will be higher than that. I hope that that gives some reassurance.

Maggie Chapman: That is helpful, but can I check your figures? You mentioned a total contribution of over £1 billion and you said that the pilot involves funding of £130 million over two years. That is 6.5 or 7 per cent of the overall fund. I understand the point of pilots but what is the path for shifting from that pilot to full roll-out?

Kaukab Stewart: I might have to bring in my colleagues for more technical detail on the pilot.

Anna Densham: I do not have the answer for you here. I understand the concern and it is a concern that we are aware of every year. Particularly for small organisations, there is the issue of the risk of redundancy and needing to know about funding so as not to be at financial risk. There is also the bigger point about trying to be as effective as possible. That is a question that we can take back.

Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP): I want to build on that line of questioning. When we visited Blairgowrie a month ago, a key issue that came up was that of how local delivery was. The council and volunteer organisations from Blairgowrie were at that meeting, and their key points were about policy making and budgets. Last

week, we heard from the TSIs in various parts of Scotland, and, again, the issues of policy making, budgeting and making service delivery as local as possible came up.

How do we start to embed local delivery? We have talked about how to localise decision making for a long time. It came through strongly at last week's meeting that TSIs do not feel that there is parity of esteem between national Government, local government and their organisations. What do we need to do to change the culture, which I saw as a councillor and as a Scottish Government minister? What do we need to do to embed a local approach? People do not feel that they are involved in policy making or in decision making on funding. How can we cement a local approach? How can we change things in the next session of Parliament to ensure that parity of esteem is embedded and that organisations such as TSIs and those that we met in Blairgowrie feel that there is a level playing field for them?

10:30

Kaukab Stewart: In my opening remarks, I acknowledged that organisations that are based in their communities, such as local councils, know what the local issues are. Those issues will vary, depending on the area, the landscape and the different demographics. We know that the skills, knowledge and expertise are there. We are all aware that, when communities are up against it—for example, when they face adverse weather conditions—people rally round, the support kicks in and we see people at their best.

However, I take on board what you say about the fact that the opportunity for more collaborative work to be done is not embedded when it should be. The Scottish Government encourages and supports the taking of a collaborative approach, although we must remember that councils are autonomous. We work in collaboration with them.

The public sector equality duty is in my portfolio, and the committee will be aware that, as part of that work, I am doing my absolute best to make sure that we set an expectation that councils fulfil their duties. As part of fulfilling their duties, they must work in collaboration with third sector organisations that are procured to provide particular services. Everybody needs to talk to one another. In its report, the SHRC encourages that, and we support those calls.

More widely, on 19 June 2025, the Scottish Government published "Scotland's Public Service Reform Strategy", in which we set out the detail of our vision and our priorities for reform. As set out in this year's programme for government, we will publish a blueprint for community decision making by the end of this session of Parliament, which is

not too far away. That should help to shape a different democratic future in which communities are further empowered to make more decisions for themselves. It is also worth noting that the Community Wealth Building (Scotland) Bill, which was introduced in March, is currently going through stage 1 of the parliamentary scrutiny process, which is being led by the Economy and Fair Work Committee.

Therefore, we are providing leadership and leading by example. We are also reminding public bodies about and reinforcing the importance of the equality duties that everybody has. In addition to the legislation that is in progress, there is the public service reform strategy.

Paul McLennan: Looking forward, if we are still sitting here in five years' time, before the end of the next parliamentary session, how will we measure success? I totally understand and appreciate what you have said about the work that is being done, but how will we measure its success? During last week's debate on the Community Wealth Building (Scotland) Bill, a key issue that was raised was that of how we measure success. If the committee is looking at the same issue in five years' time, how will we measure success? What will enable us to say to the TSIs and the groups in Blairgowrie, "This is how we've been successful"? How will we monitor success? How will we ensure that parity of esteem is embedded? What will enable us to say, "Right, we've done this because of A, B and C"?

Kaukab Stewart: The most important voice for measuring success is always the people's voice. I have always said that a good model to follow is to triangulate everything with lived experience and to make sure that people's actual experiences match the data and the strategies. That enables progress to be tracked.

People's lived experiences are extremely important, and they need to be checked against the data. Those experiences might be based on perception, which is equally important. Sometimes, with certain communities, we might be looking at very small cohorts of people, so there needs to be a checking process. I always think that the best model is one in which the policy and the statistical data analysis that goes with it are cross-referenced with lived experience.

I am aware that we do regular surveys, so we might be able to provide some more information on that. I am aware that the Government carries out surveys on rural and island communities in particular. We check in to find out whether there have been any improvements and to hear about people's experiences.

Is there anything that you wish to add, Anna?

Anna Densham: Paul McLennan asks a very good question, to which the answer is necessarily broad. For island and rural areas in particular, we have been building up a more disaggregated data picture that gives us quantitative information that we can compare over time. We complement that picture with findings from consultations and our own engagement, through which we are able to draw out some of the stories. You ask how we will know, in different areas of service delivery, that the partnership models are working better and that we have got the best as a result of each part of government working together. That knowledge will come partly from stories. We hear stories about where the partnership approach is working well at the moment or where things are being developed. For example, some of the community wealth building success in North Ayrshire is exciting and good to learn from.

This is not my area of expertise, but I imagine that local councils will be able to report on partnerships that are being developed. Ultimately, success is about how well services are being delivered. If those models are the right models, we would expect the bigger outcome measures to go up.

Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): Good morning, and thank you for the information that you have provided so far.

It was clear from last week's evidence session that not all rural areas are the same and that each area faces its own unique challenges. We also heard about the importance of a joined-up approach when it comes to improving access to services. For example, the lack of rural doctors is interlinked with housing shortages and poor transport links. That is why we cannot address one issue without addressing the others. Local people are best equipped to identify such issues and, in some cases, they are able to identify solutions that are unique to their communities.

Do you agree that one size does not fit all and that the current system is broken? When you have appeared before the committee on previous occasions, we have spoken about the need for joined-up working across departments, because one area cannot work without the other. We are hearing the same in relation to rural areas. As you have said previously, it is not simply a question of budgeting. The same is true of rural areas. We cannot provide general practitioners in areas where there is no housing and no good transport. How can the broken system be mended through the work that you are doing?

Kaukab Stewart: It is important that people work across portfolios. I recognise that there are challenges, and I agree that one size does not and cannot fit all. I have visited projects from Dumfries to Harris, to speak to people and to hear about

their real-life experiences, which has been highly informative.

However, I do not agree that the system is broken. I would characterise it as facing profound challenges, the impacts of which can be significant; I do not accept that it is broken.

In relation to the significant challenges that are faced, we have produced the rural delivery plan and the national islands plan. Some people have asked, "Why have two plans? Why not put everything in one plan?" The fact that we have two plans answers your question. It demonstrates that the issues that are faced in the Highlands and Islands can be very different from those that are experienced in rural areas such as Dumfries and Galloway. Although there are similarities, there will be differences—for instance, with the workforce, as well as in relation to access to transport, health and housing. There will be challenges with procurement and with the transportation of people and goods, which can cost a lot more. There are different modes of transport to think about, too—planes and ferries, as well as railways. I accept that the situation is different for everybody.

Like any organisation that has many different departments, the Government will always find it challenging to get people to work together, but I am confident that we are leading by example. Because cabinet secretaries and ministers are working together across portfolios, officials are doing that, too. For example, Trevor Owen is from my human rights portfolio, but Anna Densham covers rural matters and the Highlands and Islands area. Such cross-working already happens.

As you rightly say, when so many different elements rely on one another, there is a challenge in knowing which one should come first. Should it be transport, housing or jobs? The answer is that we need all of those. That is why, when we have strategic plans, they cover all those areas, which is why it is always very challenging to give quick, glib answers. I would love to be able to say, "This'll fix it," but even the people who have contributed to your inquiry recognise that it is a complex picture and that everything is interrelated. It takes time to produce systemic plans and to do that well and, over that time, other pressures emerge. I have mentioned the fact that, unfortunately, decisions that are made elsewhere can have an impact on progress.

I understand that people will always ask us to go faster, but I can assure you that that work is ongoing.

Pam Gosal: Do the two plans that you mentioned identify the issues that I spoke of, and are they addressing them? You also mentioned that one size does not fit all. You covered that, but

I am concerned about the joined-up approach. You said that sometimes departments do not work together. To be perfectly honest, if we were to look at the issue from a business perspective—I know this from my business background—we would say that the business would fail if departments were not working together. The Scottish Government is a big organisation and it is important for departments to work together. This is not the first time that I have brought the issue up with you; I have brought it up a few times in relation to budgeting and other things. Every time that we hear from you, you tell us that it all takes time, but what sort of timescale are we looking at for this joined-up work to start?

It is good to hear that the cabinet secretaries and ministers are working together, but I think that more than that is needed. People in rural areas need help now. You will hear from members, in their different questions, about the sorts of challenges that people face. I will ask you a direct question. Do your plans address the challenges that I am talking about? If not, what else do you have in place? If the plans do address the challenges, how long do you suggest that it will take to make sure that everything is being delivered?

Kaukab Stewart: You make a good point and, as I have said, I share your frustration. I can assure the committee that cross-portfolio and collaborative working is happening, but you will recognise the challenges of the multiple areas that are involved. Of the two plans, one is statutory, of course, but I will bring in Anna Densham to go into the technical detail of both.

Anna Densham: My answer will be broadly the same as the minister's—she has covered it well.

The short answer is yes. We are trying to do a number of things at the same time, but the interlinked nature of all the issues is central. I think that you see that particularly in the more remote rural and island areas. For example, we see from the quantitative data that comes back that access to GPs, in terms of the number of patients per GP, is generally better in rural and island areas but that there are issues for people in getting to appointments. Of course, housing also comes up all the time, for lots of different reasons.

10:45

That takes us straight into the issues of interlinkages. We are constantly dealing with the issue of complex, interlinked systems. The two forthcoming plans take all those issues and try to tackle them by chunking them up, because you must be able to handle them in some way. However, they also recognise the interlinkages. That interplay is there.

There is already a lot of on-going work behind all of this. The rural delivery plan and the national islands plan capture what is already happening, as well as where we can go further. That is supported by on-going work.

There are a number of forums within Government to help make that happen. Although the connections often happen informally, we also have formal governance structures. Although the ministerial population task force covers all population issues, it tends to pick up on issues of ageing and the depopulation of communities in our rural and island areas and the action that is under way to address those. The Minister for Equalities and a number of other ministers sit on the task force, which is supported at a lower level by a similar board for directors and deputy directors in the relevant departments across the Scottish Government to come together to crunch some of the issues. A cross-Government ministerial working group oversaw the process of developing the rural delivery plan, and the national islands plan goes to Cabinet.

The structures are in place, and the work is happening and, when the plans are published, you will see how much work is already going on, and you will see it all in the round. You will also see that the work has been updated, as the existing islands plan is now five years old.

I hope that that was helpful in explaining the approach in a bit more detail.

Pam Gosal: Thank you. I look forward to seeing more of that information. I hope that we can revisit the issue, even if that is after May 2026. I have been asking the same questions year after year, and I would like to see that, when we look back in May 2026, the plans have been put in place. It is great to have all these plans, but they must work; otherwise, success is not achieved and the challenges are not addressed.

I was hoping to hear more about there being a five-year plan and a 10-year plan, because we want to measure success. Paul McLennan asked how you do that, and it would be good to look back, perhaps next year, and see whether what we have spoken about today is working and being delivered. It is important not just to have plans, but to see the measurables in those plans as well as the timescales. I will leave that with you.

Kaukab Stewart: Can I make a comment about the rural assessment toolkit, which I may mentioned earlier? Toolkits are incredibly helpful because they give practical examples of how not just civil servants but everyone can get an accurate picture of where we are and then move strategically through things. The rural assessment toolkit was launched in April 2025, so the scaffolding is there.

You also mentioned particular areas. The rural delivery plan will cover agriculture, marine, land reform, transport, housing, social justice, population challenges, rural skills, digital connectivity, economic development, and health and social care. It is quite wide ranging in taking cognisance of all those issues.

The Convener: Thank you. Tess White will now ask some supplementary questions.

Tess White: —[Inaudible.]—extremely valuable.

The Convener: Apologies, Tess. Your microphone was not on at the beginning. Please start again.

Tess White: That's fine, convener. I was making a comment before asking a question. The SHRC's spotlight report on the Highlands and Islands was particularly valuable to the committee. It is a shame that it could not look more widely across other rural areas.

My first question, minister, picks up on Anna Densham's point about the importance of data. In particular, there is a perception, which the data supports, of an idea of the slow creep of centralisation.

You say that there are multiple areas, so where should you start? You start with the data. The public sector equality duties fall under your remit. Age and the increasing age profile of the population is a huge issue in rural areas. My question to you, minister, and to Anna Densham is whether you collect data on the nine protected characteristics, particularly age.

Kaukab Stewart: Yes—of course we collect data. The public sector equality duty places the duty of data collection on bodies that provide services, and age is one of the data sets that we collect. The challenges, of course, include addressing depopulation, which is part of my portfolio. I have visited areas across Scotland that are suffering from depopulation and I see the impacts that that can have on what are often very small communities, where even losing one family can have a significant effect. Age is important across the board, from how many youngsters we have right through to the ageing population.

We know that Scotland has an ageing population. That brings additional challenges in areas such as health and social care, transport and independent living. It also reaches into other areas, such as the provision of social security safety nets and the need to address fuel poverty and look at accessible housing. It all fits together, and data is important in that regard. However, we must remember that data is people and we cannot just go by numbers. Sometimes you cannot extrapolate a trend because the data set is quite small. Therefore, we need to be aware of the

demographic challenges and people's lived experience through hearing about that via community engagement.

I do not know whether Anna Densham has anything further to add on the specifics of data collection. Please feel free to comment if you think that I have missed anything, Anna.

Anna Densham: I have nothing to add.

Tess White: I ask Anna Densham to address the specific question. I understand from your answer, minister, that you do not collect Scotland-wide data on the nine protected characteristics and that you leave that to the individual areas. Is that correct? There is no recording and data collection against the nine protected characteristics, particularly age.

Seriously—it is either yes or no. As a committee, it helps us to know that there is a data gap. When we look at public sector equality duties, we will know that we need to look at age because, as the spotlight report indicates, that is a huge issue in rural areas. The answer is yes and no: yes, it is important, but, no, you do not collect the nine protected characteristics—age being number 1—across Scotland.

Kaukab Stewart: We do collect data.

Tess White: My next question—

The Convener: Tess, I think there was a slight delay there, but the minister was just coming back in.

Kaukab Stewart: Yes—I apologise if I was ambiguous; that was not my intention. We do collect data on age—everyone providing a public service has that responsibility. We get that data through various means, including from service users. We have all the data sets available through the census, and we can use that information to extrapolate and regionalise. That data is available.

Tess White: Neil Gray has said that long waits for routine operations for people in rural areas are unacceptable. In my area, which is largely rural, there are waits of up to five years for hip and knee replacements and waits of just under two years for cataract operations. Given that you have the data, you will know that those long waits largely affect people with an ageing profile. We are talking about huge waits, so if we are collecting data by age, do you agree that, in relation to the public sector equality duty, as a country, we are failing elderly people in rural areas?

Kaukab Stewart: I absolutely accept that there are challenges in rural areas. I have said that there are issues with distances, modes of transport and people often having to travel very far to get to hospital.

I cannot remember the statistics off the top of my head, but I believe that there have been significant improvements in waiting times for hip and knee replacements, with people being able to access those procedures.

I accept that there are challenges, but I do not accept that we are failing generally. I understand that people will have different experiences, and members raise such cases in the chamber. I accept that no one's experience of what the national health service provides should fall short, but I do not accept that we are failing across the board.

Tess White: Just in rural areas.

Another issue is the definition of "rural". Aberdeenshire, which is a largely rural area, is not funded as a rural area. There are huge issues with general practices in Portsoy, Fyvie and Inverurie; those practices are struggling. The British Medical Association has cited huge issues with the 2018 GP contract, which favours GPs in cities and lets down those in rural areas. In relation to the contract, which was not voted on by GPs in rural areas, the BMA has said that the Scottish Government

"has been unable to deliver on their promise to the profession and the public because of waning political support as shown by reduced and withdrawn investment, broken agreements, inadequate workforce planning, and an inability to implement an ambitious contract that relies on primary care service delivery transformation."

The nub of the problem is that the 2018 contract fails GPs in rural areas, so general practices in those areas are closing or threatening to close. Last week, Maree Todd and I were at an event with the Royal College of General Practitioners, which talked about the huge crisis that we face. However, there is no appetite to revisit the 2018 GP contract. That is a massive issue in rural areas, so have you and Neil Gray discussed it?

11:00

Kaukab Stewart: No, we have not discussed that. However, what you have said is now on the record, and I am more than happy to bring that up with the cabinet secretary. We will follow up that issue. Thank you for raising it.

You are right to point out the challenges that are faced in recruiting new GPs in rural areas. The Scottish Government recognises that challenge and is taking a number of actions to counter it. We incentivise GPs to take up positions in rural areas through our £10,000 golden hello scheme. NHS Education for Scotland rural fellowships in rural practice are offered across six health board areas in Scotland, and those fellowships offer qualified GPs the opportunity to develop the generalist skills that are required in rural and island areas through

working in a range of clinical settings. We also fund 70 places annually on the four-year Scottish graduate entry medicine programme—ScotGEM—which is tailored to meet the current and future needs of the NHS, with a focus on rural medicine and healthcare.

It might be interesting to note that the most recent health and care experience survey, for 2023-24, reported that 85 per cent of people on the islands agreed that they could easily access GP services, with the figure being 88 per cent for pharmacies. The survey suggests that most islanders can make GP appointments in advance—the figure is 82 per cent for NHS Orkney, 73 per cent for NHS Shetland and 76 per cent for NHS Western Isles. I hope that that gives a bit of extra context for the committee.

Tess White: It does, but you have talked only about the islands, whereas I am referring to the bulk of rural areas, in Aberdeenshire and the Highlands. The programme is not working because general practices in rural areas are struggling as a result of the 2018 contract. I will leave you to follow up that issue with the cabinet secretary—thank you for taking that on.

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): On a similar theme, minister, you said that you spoke about maternity in your discussions with the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care. Did you discuss the issues in Caithness, which are really difficult for local people? There are few natural births now, because people are going to Inverness to be induced or for caesarean sections and the like. Obviously, you did not come up with solutions or we would have heard about that, so could you give a flavour of your discussions and the areas that you are looking at to improve the issue for women in Caithness?

Kaukab Stewart: Yes. I will provide a bit of context. The main aim of my meetings with the cabinet secretaries was to remind them of the public sector equality duty, the need for impact assessments and the Equality Act 2010. Any obvious areas of overlap between my portfolio and theirs were raised, along with other issues. To be transparent, I note that the meetings often lasted only 30 minutes so they were not detailed discussions. When maternity services were discussed, they were raised in the round with other healthcare services and provision in regard to accessibility and availability in general terms.

All decisions on maternity care should ensure the safety of mothers and babies, and should ensure that women who are giving birth and their families always receive safe, person-centred maternity care that is suited to their needs. Decisions about the place of birth should be made by women in consultation with their midwife and obstetricians, taking account of individual need

and the circumstances. As a Government, we expect all NHS boards to provide maternity services that are delivered as close to home as practical, balanced with the need to ensure the safety of mother and baby.

The newly established Scottish maternity and neonatal task force will review the provision of rural maternity services. Implementing initiatives such as the best start programme, introducing continuity of care, developing community hubs and the increased use of Near Me to allow for remote consultations and appointments, where appropriate, all aim to improve delivery of maternity services in rural areas.

If there are further specific technical questions for the health portfolio, I am happy to take those away and get a response from the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care.

Rhoda Grant: It would be good to get a feel for what is happening, because access to services is all tied together. If you are in a rural area, you seem to be at the end of the line. You get fewer transport improvements. For instance, train journeys between Inverness and Wick are increasing rather than decreasing in duration. The rest of the world is getting faster rail services but they are getting slower ones. The road quality is really poor, yet people are expected to travel in these circumstances. I heard of the case of a woman who had a caesarean section in Inverness and was discharged two days later to go on a four-and-a-half-hour train journey, carrying her baby on her own. That does not feel person-centred. If someone was looking at her overall care, that should not have happened, yet we hear such stories every day. Transport infrastructure is important, as is retaining staff.

Digital connectivity is another issue. You mentioned Near Me, which is a rural solution that was rolled out during Covid for the whole country. It does not seem to be working because, yesterday, when I was driving, I heard on a radio phone-in that there was a cancer patient in Caithness who drove 100 miles to Inverness for a Near Me appointment with a consultant located further south. That seems pointless. Why did he have to drive 100 miles to have a Near Me appointment with somebody who was not there? There is disjointedness between what you say and what is happening on the ground for people. Across portfolios, what responses are you getting from your colleagues about how they are going to put that right, specifically for rural areas?

Kaukab Stewart: I have my portfolio, and I have given a commitment to the committee that, if there are specific points on other portfolios that I have not addressed, I will raise them and we can get a response back to you. I think that that is fair enough.

I recognise the challenges with digital access; in the social justice portfolio, there is an issue with digital connectivity and the uptake of social security benefits, so I totally understand the challenges. We have a statutory duty to promote the take-up of benefits across the social security system, and we aim to build in resilience so that access is not reliant on one method, such as digital. I get that across the board with the intersectionality of my portfolio. There are some disabled people, for instance, who make great use of digital devices and connectivity, but others find that a pencil and paper or a form is the more suitable way to access services, while other folk prefer a telephone call or a human being. It is about ensuring that there is a broad range of access options, which not only is good practice and more inclusive but builds resilience when digital connectivity is poor.

Perhaps one of my officials wants to come in with further details. If there are any specific elements of your question that I have not addressed, I am happy to bring that up with the minister for the relevant portfolio and get answers for the committee.

Rhoda Grant: I will move on to housing, which is another big issue that was highlighted at our round-table session. Transport and housing are the two big issues in getting people into rural areas, and they are important in relation to your responsibility for addressing depopulation.

There is a total lack of affordable housing in rural areas. Affordable houses are often built in the wrong place, and planning restrictions often make housing much more expensive to build than in other areas. For instance, you need streetlights and pavements, even though you might not have other streetlights or pavements to join up with. That adds costs, even though it is not really fitting for rural areas. Is any work on-going to make housing more affordable? That adds to the cost of building. Obviously, housing associations and councils have limited resources, so they will avoid incurring those kinds of costs. Is any work going on to look at how to build affordable housing in rural areas in a cost-effective and accessible way?

Kaukab Stewart: I mentioned that the challenges are huge, including in transporting goods. When I visited Harris and Lewis, I saw at first hand machinery being used to drill down into enormously hard rock—specialised equipment is required, as well as the building materials. I also visited local builders who were taking part in apprenticeship schemes to increase the workforce. You can see how that becomes circular. If young people have good jobs—in that case, it was in the house building sector—they are more likely to stay and to add to the economy and build up communities. The challenges are

absolutely massive, but we recognise that good-quality affordable housing is essential to attract and retain people. That links to the issue of having the right type of housing in the right place, bearing in mind the needs of young families as well as ageing populations.

We are building on the delivery of more than 12,000 affordable homes in rural and island communities between 2016 and March 2024. Earlier, I mentioned the figure of 110,000 affordable homes by 2032, with at least 10 per cent of those in rural and island communities. That is supported by the rural and islands housing action plan, which was published in October 2023 and which was developed with strong engagement from rural and island stakeholders. There are demand-led funds, such as the £30 million rural and island housing fund, which was recently extended to 2028, and the £25 million rural affordable homes for key workers fund. A range of things are going on.

Rhoda Grant: I get that, and that is money. Sadly, the housing built from 2016 was not actually in rural areas. I questioned that with the cabinet secretary previously. Much of it was built on the outskirts of Aberdeen, Edinburgh and Glasgow—more in commuter towns than in rural areas. That is where the problem is, because it is much cheaper to tick the box in that way. I have been assured that the categorisation has changed, so at least we will get some rural housing from the rural housing funds.

11:15

How do we make it easier? You talked about training. People on the islands who are in fuel poverty and who are looking to retrofit and increase insulation in their homes have to get tradespeople from the central belt. That is because local tradespeople and small companies cannot afford to send staff to Glasgow to undertake the certification that allows them to carry out that work.

Are we trying to rural proof some of those schemes to give opportunities to local businesses to build houses? I am talking about one or two houses and not schemes. Villages might need one house for the district nurse, one for the GP and one for the local person who cannot compete with the holiday home market. What are we doing to ensure access to skills and certification that is developed in urban areas? How are we ensuring that that transfers to rural areas to keep wealth, knowledge and ability within rural communities? Without that, retrofit and housing costs spiral, because you are bringing in a workforce, and you have to pay for them to live there and travel there to do the work. The material costs are hugely

different, and that just adds to the costs and makes the work unaffordable.

Kaukab Stewart: That resonates a lot with what I said in my initial response to you. You mentioned planning in your opening question. We understand that planning is a critical enabler for building more quality homes. There are challenges there. I have visited places with housing associations, local authorities and other models for building houses. Again, it is about local solutions to local issues, bearing in mind the geography, the locations and the challenges.

Work has been accelerated across planning to support the response, in the context of the housing emergency and other challenges. In September 2025, the Cabinet Secretary for Housing and the Minister for Public Finance wrote to planning authorities to make clear their expectation that an emergency-led focus should be applied to decision making in the planning system. Our national planning policy in national planning framework 4 gives explicit positive support for the delivery of more high-quality, affordable and sustainable rural homes. We have taken action to improve the resources that are available to planning authorities through measures such as the national planning hub, which will provide additional capacity and expertise to planning authorities.

On your other points, I will bring in Anna Densham.

Anna Densham: I will add a couple of points. Rhoda Grant has outlined some issues, and we know that there are many more that make rural and island housing difficult. There are very real diseconomies of scale, which have been exacerbated by the cost of material going up, issues with access to labour and so on.

One specific point that you raised was about flexibility in the planning system, which the minister just referred to. My understanding on that issue, which has come up in discussions before, is that the national planning framework allows for greater flexibility to be applied. However, at the moment, officials are going through the steps of ensuring that how to interpret and implement that is understood. In theory, the flexibility exists, and it is about making it a practical reality. That is not exactly a convenient answer but, with time, the situation should get better through the steps that are already being taken.

On your point about different models, community wealth building and so on, quite a lot of thinking is going on dotted around and some interesting new models are being developed, such as using Scottish timber—as you say, it is about finding solutions that help to reduce costs. That is being taken note of, and it is supported through the work with local authorities on housing and the

work of Highlands and Islands Enterprise and others who are supporting in that space to try to improve the overall environment for house building.

Rhoda Grant: That is helpful. It will be interesting to see how that appears at the other end of the system and whether we get more house building.

I will move on to the cost of living, which is an issue in rural areas, even in good times. Eight or nine years ago, HIE did a study on the cost of living in the islands and, even at that point, it was 20 or 30 per cent higher, just because everything is more expensive because you have transport costs. Childcare is non-existent in many areas. Where it is available, it is expensive, and you need a car to get your child to it. That was brought up at our round-table session.

What are we doing to alleviate some of those cost pressures and make it less expensive to live in island and rural communities?

Kaukab Stewart: We absolutely recognise that the pressure on household budgets is enormous. The 2025–26 budget continued to allocate £3 billion a year to policies that tackle poverty and the cost of living. I absolutely get that there will be more of an impact in rural areas, where there are additional and unique cost of living pressures compared to those in urban areas.

One example is the expansion of affordable childcare. There is also improving access to essential services and supporting rural wage growth through investment in diverse industries and skills. With regard to childcare in particular, which has an intersection with my portfolio through the addressing depopulation plan that sits with me, we are investing huge amounts of money—almost £1 billion a year—to fully fund the 1,140 hours of childcare offer, and the costs of provision in rural areas are absolutely considered in the funding formula.

As part of the addressing depopulation fund, six or seven regions had a certain amount of money—I think that it was £30,000 initially. That money was and is being used—I have visited projects that are using it—and the areas get to decide what the local need is. Some areas have decided to prioritise childcare provision. One size does not fit all, so that might not involve a nursery, because there simply might not be enough children, so then you need childminders. Childminders have the additional burden of getting certification, getting their house ready and being able to match up with families—they need to get all that sorted.

We are supporting work across the country in which specific people now have the role of providing bespoke services. We know that even providing one part-time childminder can have a

significant effect through enabling a nurse or shop worker to go to work to provide those services. That is a very practical measure, and the feedback on it has been good. Each local area has been able to decide what its priorities are. In contrast, some areas have decided to invest further in skills and retaining young people in the local area, so there is a variety.

The regional enterprise agencies work closely with partners to address equality of opportunity around housing, transport and so on. The regional growth deal rural projects are there to accelerate inclusive economic growth. I can get further information on that from the relevant cabinet secretary or minister. Generally, growing the economy is one of our top priorities, and regional economic partnerships are key to delivering that and to delivering effective regional decision making.

We are also trying to promote the social tariff. We get that it will not help every person, but we think that it will go a long way to help to deal with fuel poverty and high fuel costs. Those can be challenging for disabled households that need to have more appliances on, but even more so for those in a rural area, perhaps in the Highlands, where it is colder. You can see all the layers that are piling on, but I hope that I have given a couple of examples.

Rhoda Grant: I am aware that I have hogged the questions a bit, but I have another question, convener.

The Convener: We will have to move on, but if it is brief, please continue.

Rhoda Grant: It is about childminding. In Stornoway and Kirkwall, large childminders could not make it work, so they pulled out of the industry, leaving people in difficulties. We hear of smaller childminders who look after one or two children at home, but the hoops that they have to jump through make it impossible, so they are leaving the market as well. Is there on-going work to improve that?

Kaukab Stewart: Yes. Through our addressing depopulation fund, those are exactly the type of barriers that people are working locally to address. For instance, they work with local authority applications to get all the standards checked. It is down to the nitty-gritty of supporting people in situ. That should help with exactly that situation.

Rhoda Grant: Thank you.

Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): Good morning. We have heard about the issues that people in rural areas have with housing and childcare, and we have heard from some that transport, which is not very reliable at the best of times, can cost as much as £20 a day. To add to

the mix, women also find accessing employment particularly challenging, as they are often the main carers and finding a job to fit around caring responsibilities is never easy, although some employers recognise that challenge and offer flexible shifts. What is the Scottish Government doing to address that specific employment challenge for women in rural areas? Is joint work being done by the Scottish Government and local employers to address the issue?

Kaukab Stewart: The Scottish Government shares the committee's ambition in that regard. We want to improve labour market outcomes and experiences for people living in rural and island communities. Through the no one left behind approach, we aim to deliver an all-age, place-based, person-centred model of employability, with support being provided across communities and a strengthened partnership approach that involves the Scottish Government and local government working together with public, private and third sector organisations to design and deliver services. To back that up, we are investing £90 million in 2025–26 in the delivery of devolved employability services across Scotland, including rural and island communities.

Addressing labour market shortages requires a collaborative, concerted approach from a range of services. We are implementing activity across Government and are committed to doing more. I look forward to reading the committee's report and seeing your suggestions and recommendations.

11:30

Collectively, with partners, our aim is to build an employability system that tackles labour market inequalities by being more responsive and joined up and by aligning with the needs of employers and service provision, and which also ensures that the work is fair and accessible. Services are in place in all 32 local authorities, including rural and island areas, but we have to remember that full control over employment and industrial relations legislation remains reserved to the UK Parliament.

Marie McNair: Jobs are available, and people want to work; we just need to put in place the support that makes the system work for them.

Kaukab Stewart: Yes.

Marie McNair: The committee also heard about the complexity around accessing social security benefits, and digital connectivity is a factor in that. You have heard about the recent digital challenges affecting Tiree. What measures are in place to assist people with poor digital access, and what has been done to assist those experiencing data poverty? If you do not have that information to hand, could you follow up with the committee in writing? It would be helpful for our report.

Kaukab Stewart: I can do that. I covered much of those issues when answering Ms Grant's question, but I can add more to it. In the context of social security, Social Security Scotland's local delivery service gives clients the option to meet someone in person, face to face, as well as through digital applications.

We continue to fund an independent advocacy service to support disabled people accessing and applying for social security benefits. That service, which is currently being delivered by VoiceAbility, is free and is independent of the Scottish Government and Social Security Scotland. Since its launch in January 2022, the service has supported more than 13,000 disabled people in more than 15,000 cases as they navigate the devolved side of the social security system.

On general digital connectivity, through a combination of our work on the R100 programme, our Scottish broadband voucher scheme and continued commercial coverage, all homes and businesses across Scotland should be able to access superfast broadband connections.

You mentioned what has happened in Tiree. We recognise the impact that can be felt when things go wrong. In that particular case, I believe that Kate Forbes, the Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Gaelic, was able to support the necessary work, and that a solution has been found and connectivity is back in place. That incident has shown us where we need to do better, and we absolutely accept that. There are definite lessons to be learned from that case and I have been given assurances that we are progressing that work.

In the wider context, we are investing more than £600 million in R100 contracts and expect to cover 113,000 premises across Scotland, so the reach is expanding and the coverage is there. The largest of those contracts—the north contract—has already delivered 16 new fibre optic sub-sea cables. They provide future-proofed and resilient connectivity to up to 15 Scottish islands and will ultimately connect more than 60,000 premises, including those in the Highlands and Islands.

The Scottish Government is also playing a lead role in delivering project gigabit by managing all local and regional activity in Scotland as well as jointly managing delivery of the nationwide project gigabit contract with the UK Government.

Finally, we have also introduced amendments to the building standards scheme to require all new housing developments in Scotland to provide gigabit-capable infrastructure, subject to a cost cap of £2,000 per premises. That legislation came into force on 1 January 2025.

Marie McNair: Thank you. I welcome all of that, but it would be great if you could write to us with

details on what the Scottish Government is doing to tackle data poverty. I know about certain initiatives, such as local banks offering folk free SIM cards, but it would be good to see what joint work is happening. If you would not mind following up on that, that would be helpful.

Kaukab Stewart: Yes, of course.

Pam Gosal: I have raised many times in this committee the example of the Highland woman who had to contact 116 legal aid lawyers regarding her divorce case. If that was not bad enough, last week we heard shocking evidence from Dr Luis Yanes from the Scottish Human Rights Commission and from Alan Webb from Third Sector Dumfries and Galloway, who painted an even bleaker picture. I was shocked by examples of abused women having to travel for hours to access support, even on ferries and sometimes wearing the same clothes as they were wearing when abused.

The full extent is not known as many survivors do not feel comfortable coming forward due to a lack of support mechanisms. The fact that women's aid organisations are underfunded does not help either.

Minister, can you imagine what these women are facing? How will the Scottish Government ensure that people, especially women, in rural areas have access to support and advice when they need it?

Kaukab Stewart: I know that you take this issue very seriously and you raise it legitimately. The civil legal aid system is generally effective in delivering help to those who need it, but we recognise that there are some challenges in certain types of cases and locations. That is why solicitors in all parts of Scotland can access funding for work to be carried out under legal assistance schemes. The schemes are flexible enough for solicitors to travel to rural and remote parts of the country to conduct work, should it not be possible to instruct a local agent.

The Scottish Legal Aid Board is aware of the difficulties that people may face in securing access to justice due to the relatively low number of solicitors in the Highlands and Islands. That was a factor in the creation of the Civil Legal Assistance Office—the CLAO—which has offices in Inverness, Aberdeen and Edinburgh. The Inverness office opened in 2008, and it serves the Highlands and Islands, including the Western Isles.

The Regulation of Legal Services (Scotland) Act 2025 is a significant step towards expanding access to justice. Once commenced, the legislation will remove restrictions that prevent charities, law centres and citizens advice bodies from directly employing solicitors to provide certain

legal services to some of the most vulnerable people in society. I hope that the committee agrees that that is a significant step in expanding who can provide legal advice.

The Scottish Government is taking forward reforms outlined in our “Legal aid reform: discussion paper”, which was published earlier this year. That should simplify the process for solicitors and those needing legal assistance, and it includes longer-term proposals for funding and improving the delivery of services. All views are welcome on that discussion paper.

On women’s aid organisations, I have had the honour of visiting provision throughout Scotland, from Dumfries to way up in the Highlands and Islands. Their work is vital, and I commend it. They work incredibly hard, and I have spoken to women who have benefited as well.

I have mentioned before the equally safe strategy, which recognises that small rural and island communities face particular challenges. The strategy is funded accordingly, and the equally safe delivery plan is in place. We have mentioned the funding challenges, especially concerning multiyear funding and the precarious funding that can happen as well. However, I will end on a reminder that at least £5.4 million from the delivering equally safe fund is allocated to rural and island communities—and that excludes rural areas that are predominantly within urban local authorities, so the actual amount will be higher.

Pam Gosal: Thank you for the response, but I am a bit worried that the information you have provided is not exactly touching the ground. When I talk about the 116 times the woman had to contact legal aid, that is not an isolated case—there are many cases like that. People are contacting 30, 40 or 50 organisations and not getting anywhere. Women especially come forward in challenging times, and they are already scared. Can you imagine picking up the phone so many times and just being told, “No, no, no”? Women then decide “Do you know what—nobody is listening to me”. Then what do they go back to?

It would be good to hear from you on that, minister. I do not see the information you have provided delivering out there, because we have heard about the issues over and over in this committee.

On women’s aid, as you know, I have the Prevention of Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Bill going through Parliament at the moment. In working on that bill, I have been fortunate enough to speak to women’s aid and other organisations throughout Scotland—from rural areas to urban areas. While I respect the equally safe fund—I have recognised that in my bill as well—the rural organisations highlighted that it is not enough.

They need support and they need multiyear funding as well, which I know you mentioned. There are a lot of challenges.

Today marks the start of 16 days of activism against gender-based violence. I attended an event yesterday in East Dunbartonshire, my own area, where people told me that there is not enough funding for people who use British Sign Language. They were talking about areas such as Dumfries and Galloway and other rural areas, and the challenges they are facing. As I said, no one size fits all—I have just mentioned minorities, especially those with disabilities, and they need much more support and assistance. Right now, the equally safe fund provides some support, but it does not provide the tailored support that women’s aid groups need in rural areas. It would be good to hear from the minister on how—outside equally safe—organisations will be funded to deal with such challenging issues.

Kaukab Stewart: The equally safe delivery plan is held jointly with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, and it provides services through third sector organisations across multiple portfolios, including health. It is an example of cross-portfolio delivery.

We are expanding access to justice in the ways that I mentioned, for instance by removing restrictions that currently prevent charities, law centres and citizens advice bodies from providing legal services. You and I both know that they often have solicitors working in them. Those bodies have that support, but they have not been able to offer services, so I think that there will be a significant impact in expanding provision. Citizens advice centres and third sector organisations are based in local communities, and that change should make a difference.

Pam Gosal: Thank you, minister. Once again, I hope that, when we come back after May 2026, we can look back and see what the differences are, because the issue is so important. I have spoken to so many women and heard their shocking stories, especially in rural areas, and they really need help. I am happy to hear that you are doing so much, but now it is a matter of seeing what happens when that is put into practice. A year later, what are the actions, where are we going and have they helped? Thank you so much.

Kaukab Stewart: Absolutely—thank you.

The Convener: That concludes our formal business in public this morning. I thank you all for your attendance. We will head into private to discuss the remaining items on our agenda.

11:46

Meeting continued in private until 12:12.

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