OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee

Tuesday 10 February 2026

Session 6

The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Tuesday 10 February 2026

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EQUALITIES, HUMAN RIGHTS AND CIVIL JUSTICE COMMITTEE
4th Meeting 2026, 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:

Hannah Axon (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities)
Dr Lynne Binnie (Association of Directors of Education in Scotland)
David Cameron (Scottish Union of Supported Employment)
Angela Evans (The Donaldson Trust)
Marie Harrison (Children in Scotland)
Maura Kearney (Association of Scottish Principal Educational Psychologists)
Dr Jason Lang (University of Glasgow)
Jill McAlpine (Federation of Small Businesses Scotland)
Chirsty McFadyen (Fraser of Allander Institute)
Fergus McMillan (Skills Development Scotland)
Mia Preston (Federation of Small Businesses Scotland)
Alan Thornburrow (Salvesen Mindroom Centre)
Gerard Wilkie (Educational Institute of Scotland)
Marek Zemanik (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Euan Donald

LOCATION

The James Clerk Maxwell Room (CR4)

Scottish Parliament

Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee

Tuesday 10 February 2026

[The Deputy Convener opened the meeting at 09:00]

Neurodivergence

The Deputy Convener (Maggie Chapman): Good morning, everyone, and welcome to the fourth meeting in 2026, in session 6, of the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee. We have apologies from Karen Adam and Tess White. Pam Gosal and Rhoda Grant are joining us remotely; you will see them on the screen.

I welcome everyone who is sitting round the table. Our only agenda item in public this morning is a continuation of our evidence taking as part of our inquiry into neurodivergence in Scotland. The inquiry was precipitated by the Scottish Government's decision in 2024 to delay the introduction of a learning disabilities, autism and neurodivergence bill. In the inquiry, we will be focusing on the experience of neurodivergent people in education, employment and the criminal justice system. This morning, we will hear from witnesses in two round-table sessions: the first with a focus on education and the second with a focus on the workplace.

We begin with our first round table, but before we move to questions from members, I invite everybody to introduce themselves. I will begin, and then we will move round the table from my right. I am the deputy convener of the committee and a Scottish Green MSP for the North East Scotland region.

Dr Lynne Binnie (Association of Directors of Education in Scotland): Good morning. I am the head of education for City of Edinburgh Council, and I am here in my capacity as co-chair of the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland inclusion network.

Hannah Axon (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities): I am a policy manager at the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities with a remit for mental health and wellbeing.

Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): I am the MSP for Clydebank and Milngavie, in the west of Scotland.

Dr Jason Lang (University of Glasgow): Good morning. I am a clinical senior lecturer in neurodevelopment at the University of Glasgow, a consultant child and adolescent psychiatrist and an autistic person with an autistic daughter—I am wearing a lot of hats today, I am afraid.

Marie Harrison (Children in Scotland): I am the service manager for the children's views service that sits within Children in Scotland. Our primary function is to support children with additional support needs to share their views in education disputes.

Maura Kearney (Association of Scottish Principal Educational Psychologists): I am principal educational psychologist in Renfrewshire and I am here on behalf of the Association of Scottish Principal Educational Psychologists.

Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP): I am the MSP for East Lothian. I was previously a councillor in East Lothian for 15 years.

Angela Evans (The Donaldson Trust): I am from the Donaldson Trust. I am the current headteacher of our sensational learning centre, which is a grant-aided special school for primary and secondary pupils.

The Deputy Convener: We move to those who are appearing online.

Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): Good morning. I am a Scottish Conservative member of the Scottish Parliament for the West Scotland region.

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): I am a Labour Party MSP for the Highlands and Islands.

Gerard Wilkie (Educational Institute of Scotland): I am a special education teacher representing the Educational Institute of Scotland.

The Deputy Convener: You are all very welcome—I thank you for introducing yourselves. I say to Gerard Wilkie and the members who are appearing online that if you want to come in at any point, please indicate in the chat function. If I do not catch your eye, the clerks will let me know and we will bring you in.

I refer members to papers 1 and 2 for our meeting. We now move to questions from members, and I will kick things off.

With regard to access to assessments, diagnosis and post-diagnosis support, we know that there are very long waiting times and that the process and the pathways for assessments can be very lengthy—if they exist at all in a particular geographical location. How can schools ensure that pupils receive the support that they need not only throughout the process of diagnosis, but regardless of whether or not they have a diagnosis?

Dr Binnie: Education is governed by the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004, which ensures that we meet the needs of learners with additional support needs. Technically, therefore, a diagnosis should not matter with regard to support for the education offer for children and young people. The support should be put in place—the requirements are largely identified by the class teacher, and many different levels of support can be put in place. That is often recorded in a child's plan, which is the way that we take forward the getting it right for every child framework in Scotland.

With regard to education, we feel strongly that our legislation allows children to have their needs met in the classroom, regardless of whether they have a diagnosis.

Angela Evans: I think that schools are becoming the point for early identification of neurodivergence and the gateway to diagnostic pathways. We know that children need a diagnosis to access wider health and social care support; it is about taking a holistic approach. The Donaldson Trust looks not solely at a diagnosis, but at the wider support needs of the pupil. It often comes down to the reasonable adjustments that we have in place. If we do not have reasonable adjustments in place, neurodivergent learners are at risk of distress and disengagement, and of not attending school.

It is a reminder that reasonable adjustments for these pupils are statutory, not optional and that, when they are delayed or inconsistent, or dependent on diagnosis, neurodivergent learners can disengage from school. Reasonable adjustments at Donaldson are anticipatory, not reactive or dependent on diagnosis—they are put in place in response to individual sensory wellbeing, regulation and communication needs, and they are reviewed regularly.

Those are the things that ensure that we are meeting the needs of our young people. We know that there are significant waiting times for an attention deficit hyperactivity disorder or autism diagnosis, and that has an impact on schools. Teachers are doing their absolute best to meet the needs of neurodivergent learners, but often without the supports and services that they need around them.

The Deputy Convener: I see that Gerard Wilkie wants to come in. I will then come back to those in the room. It is over to you, Gerard.

Gerard Wilkie: The EIS did an all-member survey in 2024, and one of the questions was:

> "To what extent are children and young people in your setting able to access frontline support services at the point when their support need is identified?"

The responses came back as follows: 45 per cent said "occasionally"; 28 per cent said "sometimes"; 12 per cent said "never"; 9 per cent said "frequently"; and 1 per cent said "all the time".

The additional comments in the responses to the question further emphasised the view that waiting for support has a negative impact on a young person. I will give a couple of examples. One said:

> "We have a significantly high number of children in our school with additional needs and the amount of referrals we have to write and manage is very difficult. Most of these are then rejected and the process then has to start again to another service."

We also had comments from members in rural parts of Scotland and island communities. They felt that services had become overly centralised, which was making it challenging for parents and their children to attend appointments.

We have to bear in mind that not all additional support needs are medical or diagnosable in nature, but many are. In those cases, early diagnosis is helpful. The current delays between the different stages of support—highlighted in the examples that I have given from our members—which are caused in part by a shortage of specialist staff, and the delays in accessing child and adolescent mental health and educational psychology services, are unhelpful to the child or young person.

That is all I have to say on that just now.

The Deputy Convener: I know that we are going to unpick and explore some of the issues that you have mentioned in a bit more detail.

Dr Lang: I will explicitly try to separate my research from my personal experience, because I have both.

The research information that we have from projects that we have carried out says that, although the laws governing access to support are laudable, their aims are often not met. It has been expressed to us that there is a general culture that people need to fail before they are able to get support, which causes damage to young people. There is no, or very limited, anticipation of problems.

Although it is often said that someone does not require a diagnosis to access support, that is not what parents tell us happens in practice. It is also not my experience. I have sat in school meetings and been told that my daughter—sorry, it was not my daughter but the daughter of a friend we were representing—cannot access the autism resource base because she does not have a diagnosis. Although it is laudable that accessing support without a diagnosis is supposed to be the case, I think that the truth on the ground is that it is not the case.

There is a huge waiting time to access diagnosis—or identification; I prefer to say that somebody is identified as being neurodivergent—and it also requires a significant amount of work. We are working in other fields to try to reduce the time that that takes, because the primary problem is potentially overassessment. From my perspective as a child psychiatrist, there is also an issue with giving a diagnosis and how it then integrates into schools. Health and education are two separate services, and it is very difficult for me, as a health professional, to say to a school, “We think you should do X and Y,” because that is not our jurisdiction. We do not know what the school can or cannot do.

I have long thought that what we really need is a proper liaison bridge—for example, the integration of educational psychologists into neurodiversity identification teams, so that there is somebody who can speak education-ese, if you like: somebody who knows what is available and what is possible. We can make suggestions, but they may not be practical or appropriate in schools, and we may be in danger of starting to tread over professional boundaries, which is not helpful to anybody.

We know from our research that 223,000 children in Scotland are regularly unable to attend school, and it is likely that the majority of those children are neurodivergent. That is an absolutely huge number. We are interested, therefore, not in the question of whether children can receive support in school—which often translates to asking “Can you be more neurotypical?” and trying to fit them into a neurotypical system—but in thinking about whether the system is right.

According to the most recent figures, 43 per cent of children and young people are currently identified as having additional support needs in education. That seems unreasonable. It does not follow logic that 43 per cent of children require additional support to access learning. I made a bit of a meme, if you like, which said that if someone owned a supermarket and 43 per cent of their customers could not reach the shelves, what would their problem be? It might not be appropriate to tell the customers to reach harder, which is what often happens, unfortunately—parents tell us that children are told to reach more, try harder and do better. I have in front of me an email from my daughter’s school that says exactly that, in as many words. I think that I have previously submitted that email to the committee’s inquiry.

The supermarket could employ a lot of staff with stepladders to help people to reach the shelves. That is currently what we do—kind of. People run around with stepladders, which are, in this case, ASN supports and reasonable adjustments. Those supports hit some people, but they do not hit others. In my personal experience, the support requirements are inconsistently followed. At the age of 15, my daughter is not able to attend education any more, because she had reasonable adjustments in place that were systemically ignored by the school from time to time. For an autistic person, that is completely devastating, because they do not know when it is going to be okay and when it is not. That fear of uncertainty is very destabilising.

The other option is to redesign the supermarket shelves and bring them down to a level at which people can actually access them. Are the fact that 43 per cent of children have additional support needs and the fact that 223,000 children are not attending school a sign of a problem with neurodivergence or of a problem with the design of a system that does not allow a large chunk of society to access what is rightfully theirs?

My daughter was offered two periods of attendance with a support teacher outside school, and that was described to me as a good offer. As a parent, I said, “Well, first, it’s not an offer—it’s a right that she has, so you shouldn’t be offering us anything. Secondly, if I bought a car from Arnold Clark and paid full price for it and you brought me two seats and a steering wheel, would you think that that was a good offer?” That was my response to the school.

09:15

I think that you will find that there are a lot of parents—we find them in our research—who say the same thing. Qualitative research in this area reaches saturation at interview *n*=1. In other words, once you have done one interview, almost every single parent tells you the same story. The dates and the times change, but it is the same story repeated.

A huge number of neurodivergent young people are not able to engage in society and are feeling excluded from society, which results in more than 50 per cent of young people in His Majesty’s Young Offenders Institution Polmont having a diagnosis of ADHD—and the figure is potentially much higher than that. It results in only 20-odd per cent of the adult population who are autistic and who want to work actually being able to work. It results in potentially up to 43 per cent, in some studies, of completed suicides having a background of an autistic neurotype in psychological post-mortems.

There is significant evidence that neurodivergent people are excluded from society systemically. The problem is not how we support them to be more neurotypical; the problem is how we think about our systems in the long term in a way that means that everybody can actually access them.

The Deputy Convener: Thank you. You have given us a lot there, and I appreciate that.

I will bring in a couple more people and will then come back on some of the things that have been said.

Hannah Axon: I echo what Lynne Binnie said at the start, about the legislative underpinning for the way that education works, and I would highlight the unprecedented levels of need that we are currently dealing with across the system, which has placed additional pressures on education.

With the Government, we reviewed the implementation of a neurodevelopmental service specification for children and young people, outlining what a holistic approach would look like. That review was published last year, and we found a number of challenges. One was the front loading—that is not the best phrasing—of the ask into education around preliminary assessment and diagnosis, and the filling out of different forms with the pieces of information that health services require. The education sector is potentially putting more work into this space than has ever previously been put in. I think that it is useful to acknowledge the demand that that is placing on education.

As part of that review, we found that the level of resourcing for additional needs was really challenging. There has not necessarily been any additional resource coming in, certainly not as a result of the neurodevelopmental specification ask. The financial resource, and also the staffing resource, presents a real challenge.

As we conducted that review, what came through in some of the surveys was a lack of clarity around what the roles of different stakeholders are in relation to supporting children and young people. We can see what education is doing and what health is doing, but those two things do not necessarily marry up. Jason Lang pointed to a lack of clarity about what health thinks education might do, which potentially results in very unclear expectations among children and young people and their families.

We found from local authorities that a child may have been on the waiting list for a long time and their school has put the support around the child that they are able to provide. The child has gone to CAMHS and has been sent back for support from the school, with CAMHS anticipating that there will be more support, but there is not. That has been bad for relationships all round. What has also come through is the need for clarity and clear communications, and for a whole-system understanding.

One of our review's recommendations was to develop a high-level descriptor of what the system might look like and what support children and young people might require. We talk a lot about a pathway, but not all children need to go from one end to the other. We need to look at what might be required at each point and how that might be interpreted locally, because it would still require local interpretation.

There is quite a lot of information about the challenges that we are seeing in delivery. I could point to a number of points in there.

The Deputy Convener: Thank you. That is really helpful.

Marie Harrison: What we are finding in our direct work with children and young people is that there is a distinct implementation gap between the wonderful, beautiful policy and legislation that we see in Scotland, and the reality. As a Danish person coming over here, I think that Scotland has a lot to be proud of. You have an incredibly dedicated workforce of teachers, pupil support assistants and so on who are doing absolutely everything that they can, and you have legislation and policy that really want to do right by children and young people.

However, I think that the ask on local authorities to deliver what the legislation says that they have to deliver is not realistic with what they have available to them. I do not think that anyone sets out in the morning to harm children or put them in a situation where they are not able to benefit from their education. Everybody wants to do the best that they can, but the gap between the promise and what is realistic is just far too wide.

What happens in such a situation is that parents and children and young people become very frustrated and agitated, because they can see where they should be able to access those services. They can see that they should be able to have an education that caters to their needs, but that is not possible. We then potentially see an overreliance on processes such as the additional support needs tribunals, which leads to increased costs for local authorities, making it even harder for them to deliver the services that they are meant to deliver.

We would beg everybody to try to focus on, and support families to access, non-traditional routes to dispute resolution such as independent advocacy, mediation and views-gathering services to get in and support children and families and those educational relationships as early as possible. Some initiatives are available in Scotland—for example, we have the My Rights, My Say project, with which I am heavily involved—and we can do a lot through those processes. We cannot do everything but, in the light of the incorporation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in legislation in Scotland, further funding for those routes would be really helpful.

The original question was about what schools can do to support these processes. A big part of that, in my view, would involve working more closely with the third sector and trying to put us in a position where we can do more to support everything that is going on.

Something that Jason Lang said resonated with me—the whole structure around education seems inadequate. We have 43 per cent of children and young people now identified as having additional support needs, and we have an education system that was largely set up back in the 1900s as a response to industrialisation. We have transcended that society, and children and young people today live lives that are very far removed from the lives of the children for whom education was set up to cater. A lot of conversations, reviews and inquiries are trying to respond piece by piece to the very big structural difficulties with which we are faced, and we potentially need to think bigger than that.

Maura Kearney: With regard to the structures that we work within, we have seen increased pressure in relation to additional support needs. We have seen, locally and nationally, the number of children who have been identified as having neurodivergence triple over the past five years, so you can imagine the pressures in the system. Looking at wider additional support needs, we also have parents and children with mental health issues, so we can see a variety of needs across that 43 per cent.

Taking on board Jason Lang's point about educational psychologists and health colleagues working more closely together, I think that there is a significant amount of assessment within the school system as it is. When a child goes into additional support for learning provision—which they can access with or without diagnosis, as they can access assessment or training for staff—we have that information, and we need to work in less siloed ways so that we provide it to health colleagues. I do not know that it would be a fully integrated team. There is a huge amount of work within local authorities and schools that we are directly providing, but I think that there needs to be closer working in that regard.

Angela Evans: At Donaldson's, we work very closely with a speech and language therapist. She is employed by Donaldson's and she is with us four days a week. We also have a play therapist with whom we work closely, and we work closely with education psychologists from the local authority. We really see the benefits of that joined-up working.

The time that it takes to get a diagnosis is a significant equity issue, and it has a significant impact on the wellbeing and inclusion of neurodivergent learners. Neurodivergence is becoming overlapping and it is complex. Approaches such as that set out in "The Right Help at the Right time in the right place" absolutely appropriately focus on need and not diagnosis, but we also need to look at the sustained pressure that the situation is putting on schools. I think that it exposes a gap between inclusive policy intent and the lived experiences of teachers and neurodivergent learners in the classroom.

The Deputy Convener: Jason Lang wants to come back in.

Dr Lang: Yes—it is on that point. I agree with what Maura Kearney said. We might not have integrated systems, although that would be a gold standard if we could work out how to do it, but at least liaison bridges would be better than what we have at the moment.

Diagnosis adds validity for young people. We are concerned when we hear talk about just providing support. I have heard people say something along the lines of, "Having a diagnosis doesn't make any difference to what we do in school." There is an issue with that, because having a diagnosis or, better, an identification, tells you your make and model. That is really what we are working out—we are working out people's make and model. Sorry—I use a lot of metaphors. As an autistic person, I know that I am not allowed to, but bear with me for a second. If you have a car and you do not know whether it runs on petrol or diesel, you will have problems. You need to know what a child's neurotype is before you start to design environments that will suit them.

I want to go back to Marie Harrison's point about school systems. I do not ever want to come across as being critical of teachers. We can sometimes be misinterpreted as saying that, but I completely agree that teachers are working flat out, and probably more than they are compensated for in terms of pay and resources. For the most part, they are doing their absolute best within the system, but there are a couple of issues. One is that the system as it stands is, as has rightly been said, designed with a single door of entry and a single door of exit, and that does not work for neurodivergent people.

Somebody mentioned that we now have a much higher number of neurodivergent people, but I think that the truth is that it is a much higher number of people who are identified as being neurodivergent. We do not have any evidence that there has been an increase, or that some magical thing has happened that has increased the number of autistic kids or the number of children who are neurodivergent. It is more likely that neurodivergent children are the canaries in the coal mine. They are the early casualties of a system that does not work for them. Anything that destroys a neurodivergent child at least irritates a neurotypical or more neurotypical person.

In our neurodiversity in Scottish schools project, we identified that, although teachers are super well-meaning and want to do what they can, there are two significant limiters. One is that a school's outcomes are measured pretty much solely on exam attainment. There might be a little bit about positive destinations but, as far as we can tell, positive destinations can be spun as anything that is not prison. I am slightly exaggerating, but it is not far off that. Even volunteering one afternoon a week without pay would be potentially squeezed in as a positive destination. However, for the most part, the outcomes are all about exams.

At the University of Glasgow, we do not measure in that way. I am not measured on exam techniques; I am measured on a satisfaction survey of my students. Exam results are exam results. The university is interested in student satisfaction. What is the student's experience and their health and wellbeing? That is what I am measured on in my job, through my personal development plan.

That is important. Headteachers told us that they know what they want to do in schools, how they want to change stuff, and what they could do, but they cannot do that, because, when it comes to keeping their job, the only thing that they are measured on is the number of national 5s at grade C and above, or whatever it is. That is an issue, because somebody with ADHD cannot attain success in that system without medicating themselves or doing something that makes them more neurotypical. Currently, the only way to pass exams is to sit for two or three hours in a hall, concentrating on one thing—essentially, that is the only route to success for children.

09:30

For autistic children, there is an increase in the number of social interactions in the curriculum. For example, they have to do group work. When I was at school, we were very much sat in rows. The teacher told us what to do, we worked on it, and that was that. The system has changed significantly over time, and much more social interaction is now required, which places significant demands on neurodivergent people. We do not know, but it might be that those are the things that are gradually raising the threshold of children becoming unstuck.

It was not great, but I managed through school as an autistic person and without being identified as autistic. However, my schooling system was very different from the one that my daughter has tried to engage with. There are simple approaches that could be taken. In Argentina, the children do not change classrooms every 50 minutes; instead, the teachers change classrooms. That reduces the crush in the corridors, and that crush is another reason why my daughter cannot go to school. There are 2,700 or so pupils in a building that is too small. You would never put yourself through that—it would not happen in the Scottish Parliament. You would not tolerate having that number of people crushing into corridors here, but we somehow tolerate it in schools. That is destructive for neurodivergent children, and particularly autistic children.

There are systemic questions that we could ask. Why do we not move 57 teachers every 50 minutes so that there would be no crushes in the corridor? That is what happens in the system in Argentina, for example. There are things that we could learn from other places.

I again come back to system issues. We need to measure targets. What would happen if we suddenly asked schools to measure the health and wellbeing of their pupils and forget exam results? The evidence suggests that exam results would follow, anyway, because happy learners do better. We have a system that is designed for one thing. As Marie Harrison said, we have laudable Government policies that are aimed at inclusion in a system that is fundamentally not designed to include. It is designed to exclude—not intentionally, but the design causes that. You cannot put square pegs into round holes.

The Deputy Convener: I was going to bring in Rhoda Grant on reasonable adjustments but, given that we have started on education, the curriculum and exams, I will bring in Paul McLennan to ask his question.

Paul McLennan: I will ask my question, and I have a comment as well. We have had various discussions, at council and other levels, about the key issue of how we triage. That is almost about who comes first. We have all talked about the increasing numbers, but how we triage is a very important question.

There is also a question about assessing demand. We have seen demand increase in the past number of years. Will there be an exponential increase in the next few years as well? It is important to consider what we need to do in the current situation, but we also need to think about what we do in three, four or five years, if the numbers increase.

I do not know who wants to answer that question. I might come in on the back of the answers, very briefly.

The Deputy Convener: Maura Kearney wants to come in on education, but I will come back to her, as Lynne Binne wants to come in on that question.

Dr Binnie: On the exponential growth in additional support needs that we are seeing across local authorities and nationally, ADES is involved in the conversations that are happening in various places to try to explore and unpick that. Across most local authorities, we see an increase in secondary schools when compared to primary, which I think is a result of increased identification and some of the structural changes and issues that we have in secondary.

It is important to remember that, for professionals working in education, our additional support needs categories are very wide and diverse. They include not only children with autism and ADHD, which are the two conditions that are typically contained under neurodiversity, but children who have English as an additional language, children who are young carers, care-experienced children and young people and those with dyslexia and dyscalculia, which I consider to be a neurodivergent need.

The teachers in all our classes in every school in Scotland have a high number of children with additional support needs. Here in the city of Edinburgh, we have schools where up to 80 to 90 per cent of children have additional support needs.

Therefore, through the work that we do in local authorities, including in educational psychology, we look at those issues with a view to removing barriers to learning and making our curriculum and our pedagogy as inclusive as possible.

Will we see a reduction in the numbers over time? I am not sure that we will. We are having discussions internally as to whether we need to look again at the legislation and to consider giving clearer guidance on the categories.

During the time that I have been involved in working in this area, we have also seen a rise in comorbidity—the number of children who have mental health issues as well as autism, ADHD and dyscalculia. Our class teachers and schools are having to cope with complex social problems and issues. They are trying the best they can to reduce the barriers to learning to allow those children and young people to access the learning in the class.

With our current legislation, I do not know whether we will see a reduction in those numbers. I predict that, if anything, they will continue to increase, but we need to look below them to find out what they truly tell us. Recent Scottish Government figures tell us that the majority of children with additional support needs are having their needs met in the classroom, and that it is the class teacher, through differentiation in practice, who is putting in place the reasonable adjustments that enable those needs to be met. Very few of our children and young people in Scotland are educated in the special school sector—the figure is 2 to 3 per cent, and, in some local authority areas, it is much lower.

Understanding the data and the underlying needs gives us a sense of the complexity of the issues that our schools are dealing with. As Hannah Axon pointed out, we also need to understand the challenge around the resourcing of that within local authorities, which includes ensuring that our workforce—our teachers and our support staff—has the skills that it needs. In addition, we need to understand that, because of the numbers and the demand on services, services are having to increase the thresholds for support.

There is significant complexity underneath those figures.

Paul McLennan: Jason, you have touched on the issue of whether the curriculum, including the approach to exams, suits neurodivergent pupils. You said that it does not. Can we tailor the curriculum? If so, how?

I come back to a point that Lynne Binnie made. I have had discussions with parents who say that schools are always talking about the child’s plan—the individualised education plan. Given the increase in the number of children with additional support needs, it becomes hard to deal with those plans. It is incredibly tough to fit a number of kids’ plans into a complex school curriculum.

What can we do to make sure that the curriculum suits everybody? Instead of having a typical curriculum that neurodiverse kids are supposed to fit into, we want it to be the other way around. That is the real challenge.

Dr Lang: I want to pick up on some issues that are relevant. We need to be very careful about how we interpret data. The suggestion that the vast majority of neurodivergent children have their needs catered for in education is not at all consistent with our findings.

Colleagues of ours had to work very hard to come up with the 223,000 figure, because absence is not always reported in the same way. Different local authorities report absence in different ways. There are huge inconsistencies. A lot of freedom of information requests were made to gather that information in as scientific a way as possible.

We need to be very cautious. Although it is said that the majority of neurodivergent children have their needs catered for in education, we know from other organisations that we work with that that is fundamentally not the case. I am willing to be corrected, but that is not what we hear on the ground about the experience of parents. We also need to be cautious about that data, because there will be relative bias in what we hear from the people who talk to us, who are people with problems. We need to be careful with the data and ensure that we are definitely comparing apples with apples.

You asked whether we can change the curriculum. Yes, we can. Scotland very nearly did that with the curriculum for excellence, but, in the end, it did not. I refer you to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's report on the implementation of the curriculum for excellence.

What would work? Are there other ways of doing things? Yes, it is clear that there are.

I am a consultant psychiatrist; since my membership exams, I have not sat another exam, yet I am still allowed to practise medicine. I do portfolio learning. The airline pilots who fly you around pass their initial courses, for sure, but, after that, it is all about the number of successful landings and take-offs, doing reflective practice, submitting a portfolio and getting their licence continued. A significant number of risky jobs are completed by people who use portfolio learning examples.

Do we have to sit exams? I am not sure that we do. Are there other ways in which we can do assessment? We are doing that in a huge way in the university sector, with a shift away from examinations—certainly closed-book examinations—to much more neurodivergent-friendly approaches. We have to be careful of continuous learning; that can be a real problem for people with ADHD, as it is just a series of continuous demands. Every month, there is another, and yet another, demand, and you cannot fall behind. As I have said, we have to be careful of that, but portfolio learning—demonstrating learning outcomes—is really what we want to prove that somebody has learned something.

Are there other ways in which you can demonstrate that? Yes. Are there potentially systemic changes that you could make to encourage that? Yes. For example, you could change the standards by which schools are measured. These are things that we discovered in our neurodiversity in Scottish schools, or NISS, survey, and which we have put together in our NISS framework.

We think that there should, potentially, be a culture change within schools, with a shift away from the deficit focus. Historically, neurodivergence has always been thought about as a condition and in terms of comorbidity—indeed, I have heard that mentioned here a couple of times—and there is a sense of it being something that needs to be corrected. There is an internal narrative, which we have all been steeped in for many years, of a psychomedical model of deficit around autism. That is how you are diagnosed with autism; it is a case of, "I have a deficit in this, I have a deficit in that and I have a deficit in the next thing."

The expectation ought to be that everybody in this room is genetically different. We all have different fingerprints and different DNA; why would we expect our brains to be wired and to function in exactly the same way? That is the concept behind neurodiversity—we are all diverse.

Complexity has been mentioned, but it is not really complexity per se. It is just that humans are complex individuals. Moreover, when it comes to diversity, we have to get away from the idea of silos. Another legacy problem that affects schooling is the sense that we are doing these things for autistic children or for ADHD children. I would refer you, for example, to the autism toolkit or toolbox—whatever it is called. There is no child who is autistic only; if there is, they are vanishingly rare. What we know is that all neurodivergence overlaps; ADHD and autism almost always go hand in hand—at least to trait level, if not completely to diagnostic level—and dyslexia, dyscalculia and dyspraxia are all in a mix.

Everybody's neurotype is slightly different. Personally, I have a diagnosis of autism—that is my primary neurotype. However, chunks of my brain, and how it functions, have bits of ADHD in there, and there are definitely bits of dyspraxia. I am a consultant psychiatrist, but I could not tie my shoelaces until I was 12 years old, and I still cannot fit things together. When I put together Ikea furniture, it is a disaster—it is just not for me. I am learning Spanish just now, and I am remembering that there are aspects of dyslexia in there, too, when it comes to hearing sounds and being able to translate them into written words. At 49 years old, I have largely overcome that in English, but they come back. We are all a mix, and neurodivergent people tend to be a mix of lots of different neurotypes.

As for whether the figures will continue to rise, I suspect that they might. There are two things here that we raised at the summit with the minister, the first of which is the need for an immediate action plan to reduce waiting times and get people through the system. That is the crisis; you have waiting times of five years, and possibly more.

Remembering that figures always get massaged, I suspect that the times in the published figures are probably—most likely—a little bit shorter than the reality in most people's experience. That needs to be dealt with, but it is a short-term measure. Essentially, we have got ourselves into this situation, and if we just keep doing what we are doing, we will not get out of it.

Equally, there has to be long-term work to change the culture and the structure. That is something that goes across society, though—it is not just for education. An example would be work that has occurred since the 1960s and 1970s in LGBTQI communities, for example, or in society as a whole in relation to LGBTQI people.

09:45

In the lifetimes of many of us in this room, diagnostic descriptors and diagnostic manuals included homosexuality as a mental illness. I think that it was only removed in the late 1970s or early 1980s—I cannot remember exactly when it happened—but it was previously in diagnostic manuals of mental illness, just as autism and ADHD and other conditions are currently in diagnostic manuals of mental disorders. Thankfully, time moves on. If we were having this discussion in 1929, the rate of autism would be zero because we had not defined it as a thing, but to think that the number of autistic people who existed at that time was zero is a fallacy—it is not true.

Will the numbers keep going up? Yes. Does it matter? There is another question that factors in some of the stuff that is coming out from the United States, where they are saying, "I cannot believe that more than 10 per cent of people are autistic." The question that we do not know the answer to is how many autistic or neurodivergent people there should be in the world. All we know is how many people are identified as autistic or neurodivergent.

It is more likely that the number of people who require identification is a sign that the system is not working for that group of people. There is now a name for that: hermeneutical injustice. That means that an injustice is perpetrated against you, but you cannot name it, do not know what it is and cannot do anything about it—I hope that that makes sense. Now that we have a name for it, people can identify it and say, "Oh, that's a bit like me. Maybe that's what's happening." I think that that is the most likely explanation for the rise in identified need.

More widely, we also have acute societal-level stress, as a result of cost of living problems and post-austerity issues. There is something to be said for the idea that, if the level of anxiety is high among the population as a whole, neurodivergent people are the canaries in the coal mine, and it is likely to hit that group harder.

Maura Kearney: Regarding the argument for fewer exams, I think that that would support lots of young people across the system. Although exam results are a predictor of later-life success, they are absolutely not the only metric that educationists value. We have national and local health and wellbeing surveys, and we often have classroom health and wellbeing surveys. They are a hugely important aspect of thinking about the child holistically, and I think that the vast majority of schools engage with them.

Quite a few years ago, I did a study that looked at the number of local authorities that were engaged in whole-school nurturing approaches—at that point, about 30 out of 32 local authorities did so. People still see such approaches as the basis when it comes to how to support children's health and wellbeing. However, it is not only about taking a nurturing approach; it is also about taking a language and communication-friendly approach and using the national autism implementation team materials, which are focused on changing attitudes, because a nurturing school should be inclusive for any child who has additional support needs.

Although I am not saying that there is not an emphasis on qualifications authority outcomes, they are part of a bigger picture, and every headteacher who I speak to says that they need to get the ethos right and the nurturing approach correct before anybody learns in that environment. That is a strong focus in our schools and establishments.

Marie Harrison: I will try to quickly address the points around assessments, potential exams and triaging. The very wonderful Sir Ken Robinson said that we have a problem in the world because we only educate children from the waist up—we are so preoccupied with their heads that we forget about their bodies. That speaks to what Maura Kearney said: it would be really interesting to look at alternative assessments and exams rather than relying on such an archaic way of assessing intelligence.

Intelligence is much more diverse than we give it credit for. Our young people can shine in so many ways, but at the moment, as Sir Ken Robinson said, we are educating everyone to become a university professor. We do not need a world full of university professors; we need everybody to be able to shine in their own way.

The report of the Louise Hayward review a while back contained some very neuro-affirming ideas on what exams and assessments could look like, but a large chunk of that was sidetracked a bit, if not rejected. It might be interesting to go back and look at what that could look like for all our young people.

In relation to triaging, it is really important to think about intersecting barriers and not just consider young people as neurodivergent. I have a wonderful daughter who is on the pathway and is awaiting an autism assessment, but a potentially larger issue for her was that she was being bullied. We can blind ourselves if we focus on one area of difficulty for young people when, in fact, there could be multiple difficulties. We can have a young person who is being bullied and who has dyslexia, is autistic and is a young carer for mum at home. That is just an example of a young person we have worked with. We need to address all those things, and that is where the triaging has to get to. We need to think about everything being needs based and not diagnosis based.

In response to Lynne Binnie’s point, I note that the terminology on additional support needs is very wide. We would welcome a discussion about what that looks like and how we can ensure that everybody who has additional support needs continues to be supported, or that they are supported better than they are now. I would be very worried about having a tiered identification system within that, because some young people who are neurodivergent cope with relatively little support in school, while some without a diagnosis need much more support. There are so many variables to consider within that.

We know that more children are identified as having additional support needs in areas where there is social deprivation and families live in poverty, but that cohort of children are less likely to access, for example, co-ordinated support plans. The more invasive, holistic types of support tend to be accessed more readily by families who are able to shout the loudest for them, basically. They have the capacity because they are not preoccupied with clothing and feeding their children. That is already taken care of, so they have the time and energy for the fight. A lot more needs to be done to think about the inequality in access to support.

Angela Evans: I will build on some of the points that Maura Kearney raised and address the question on curriculum suitability. At Donaldson’s, we have huge success in alternative access to the curriculum, whether that is experiential learning, outdoor learning or skill-based alternatives. Those approaches often reduce the sensory overload and remove abstract instructions and the need for sitting for long periods of time, and they allow our pupils to demonstrate their strengths and skills in a much more meaningful context for them.

The independent review of qualifications and assessment highlights the importance of transferable skills, but schools need staffing, professional development, time and facilities. We need that broader approach to assessment that moves beyond written exams. As you know, our schools are experiencing multiple reforms of curriculum assessment, inspection and the national bodies. Alongside that, the complexity of ASN is increasing, which will directly shape how those curriculum and assessment reforms land in the classroom.

We need to value the wellbeing of our pupils alongside attainment. We need to value confidence, independence, life skills and regulation. Attainment is only a very small part of the story. Wellbeing is foundational and not secondary. At Donaldson’s, it is our core educational purpose. We have first-hand experience that, when we get the wellbeing right, our learners feel safe and able to engage in the curriculum. If we want to get the curriculum right, we need to ask the people who are experiencing it.

As neurodivergence becomes a central issue in education and not a marginal one, we need to ask our neurodivergent learners those questions, hear what they say and represent their voices so that reform is based on lived experience and not assumption. Representation of those learners’ views needs to be substantive and not symbolic, and it needs to be legitimate and transparent. I think that inclusive governance will give us a shot at narrowing the gap between policy and practice.

Paul McLennan: I know that we need to move on, but I do not know whether anyone saw the article on BBC News this morning about mainstreaming compared with specialism. That is a whole other debate, but the article was really interesting in setting out the different perspectives on specialism and mainstreaming. That is perhaps an issue for the committee to talk about, because the article was really relevant.

The Convener: We move to questions from Rhoda Grant.

Rhoda Grant: Angela Evans talked about the adjustments that could be made, but, given what other witnesses have said, it does not seem that all schools make reasonable adjustments for neurodivergent pupils. What would be the norm for making such adjustments in an ordinary school? Would there be changes in lighting or noise levels? Would there be flexibility in the use of space? What would normally be put in place for somebody who was neurodivergent?

Dr Binnie: I am very confident that all our schools make reasonable adjustments in a number of ways to meet the diverse needs of learners. Typically, we talk about universal practice, which is practice that we would wish to be in place in all our classrooms. Schools need to assess and understand their learners, and they need to deliver the pace and challenge of the learning. We use the word “differentiation”—there is all this terminology—and teachers are responsible for differentiating the learning for all children and young people.

Over and above that, schools, as a unit, have a number of supports in place. In the city of Edinburgh, where I am the head of education, all our schools have access to a support for learning teacher. There are a number of other specialist roles in our schools. For example, we have pupil support officers for attendance, nurture teachers, nurture rooms and classes, literacy support teachers and primary 7 transition teachers. All those people support children who need a more targeted and intensive level of support.

Schools are very creative and adaptable in putting in place such support. At the moment, we are working on a project about spaces and how to reduce sensory stimulation in our buildings, because there is a real challenge in how buildings can meet learners’ needs. I am aware of lots of work taking place in Edinburgh—I know that such work takes place in other local authority areas, too—to provide softer spaces, regulation spaces and outdoor learning spaces to support the regulation of our children and young people.

Over and above that, local authorities can put in place a range of specialist intensive support. That includes access to educational psychology and school counselling services, therapeutic interventions that the Government funds specifically to support children’s mental health, and outreach teachers and teams. Local authorities also have a number of contracts with third sector speech and language therapists, and our grant-aided schools, which Angela Evans is here to represent, can give us more intensive and specific advice.

A range of support and resources are in place, but there is a question about whether that is enough, given the numbers of such learners in our system and the diversity of their needs.

Hannah Axon: On the point about the learning estate, our teaching staff do a vast amount of fantastic work, but they do it within the realities of our system and our properties. They are very creative, but there are challenges in creating in older buildings, for example, the types of spaces that every neurodivergent learner might need. There are a range of needs and a range of spaces, so how can that be done in a way that works for everybody? There is massive pressure on capital funding, and it looks as though the pressure will be even more substantial as a result of the coming year’s budget. The work is being done well and creatively, but there are a range of pressures.

The Convener: Rhoda, do you want to come back in?

Rhoda Grant: Yes, please. I would like to understand what advice and guidance schools get, especially if a pupil does not have a diagnosis. The bottom line is, are we getting it right for every child? Is school meeting their needs?

10:00

Dr Lang: Is it appropriate if I read out an email in answer to that?

The Deputy Convener: Yes.

Dr Lang: On 26 January, I received an email regarding my daughter, who has been unable to attend school for about a year. She had a degree of reasonable adjustments in place, including a pass that would let her leave the class five minutes before the end of the period, so that she could move without being involved in the sensory crush. However, on one occasion, a classroom teacher decided not to grant that—it was not allowed.

We spoke to the school and asked for that member of staff to be reminded of the situation, because they might not have realised what the arrangements were or what was happening in that regard. We were told that that was done, but, in the very next period with that teacher, they did exactly the same thing again. That caused a reaction in Gracie—she could not trust anybody after that. That is the background to why she cannot get into school. Essentially, she is terrified: she vomits in the morning if she has to go.

We were offered school counselling. However, as I think that I said earlier, we have to be careful that we are not trying to get neurodivergent children to tolerate the intolerable. What good would school counselling be if the system that we required to be in place was not there? What would we be doing then? That was our worry as parents.

I want to read you this email as an example of our experience. It says:

> “Dear Parent/Carer,
>
> I wanted to take this opportunity to reflect on Gracie’s progress during the first session of the school year. As part of our commitment to celebrating the successes of the vast majority of pupils who come to school each day ready to learn and engage well in Calderglen High School we will be offering pupils the opportunity to attend our Celebrating Success trip to Blackpool. Pupils who have consistently demonstrated our school values of”—

I note that these are in bold, and are all laudable—

> “Achievement, Ambition, Determination, Inclusion, Respect and Responsibility and met our key expectations of Attend, Behave and Care will be invited to attend. In practice, this

means the following:

> A pupil's attendance being above 90%.
>
> A pupil being late no more than 5 times.
>
> A pupil receiving no more than 5 demerits/referrals for their behaviour.
>
> Unfortunately, Gracie is not currently meeting this standard—please find an update of their attendance, late-coming and demerits/referrals for the period up until the Christmas holidays below.
>
> Attendance Rate for Session 25-26 (August-December only): 47.19"—

that is probably a gross overestimation, in fairness—

> "Number of Lates: 21
>
> Number of Demerits/Referrals: 0
>
> We appreciate that there may be some individual circumstances that will have had an impact and, where we have been aware of these, this has been taken into consideration. We are committed to supporting Gracie to achieve success during their time at Calderglen and if they are able to show improvement"—

that is, work harder—

> "over the period until Friday 27 February, would be delighted for them to attend this Celebrating Success trip. I will email an update following the Easter holidays to inform you of Gracie's success with regards to this."

The legal advice that I have received is that that email is contradictory to the Equality Act 2010, which means that it is, essentially, an illegal email as it is discriminatory. However, that was sent centrally from a school in a local authority, so presumably it has been signed off at a certain level by somebody senior.

I wanted to read out that email to you because that is our personal experience. We can talk about numbers—as I said before, I am wearing two hats—but I wanted you to hear our personal experience. That is my daughter being told, "You are not good enough to come on the trip. You have not worked hard enough. You have not done enough. You have not met the standards that this school expects of you. You are not worthy." That is the message that she got, and we had two days of her sobbing. She was saying "There is nothing wrong with me, I am fine—there is nothing wrong with me," with tears running down her cheeks, until she eventually said, "Why can't I just be like the other girls? What is wrong with me?"

As a dad—especially as an autistic dad—I have a problem with that, because there is nothing wrong with her. I say to her, "When you are not in school, you are fine. What is wrong is that the system is wrong. It is nothing to do with you. You are not broken or defective in any way, shape or form. You just happen to be autistic, and that is fine." However, it is an uphill battle to preserve that sense.

I had already complained about a version of that email a year before. We did that informally, but, in relation to the issue of who is taking things to tribunal, I can say that the issue is now going to a tribunal because this is the second time that the school has said something like that. We tried to settle the issue informally. We have done the work: we have had many meetings in which we have asked whether various things can be done. Unfortunately, whatever we achieve always falls through. From personal experience, I can say that the reason it falls through is a lack of communication within the school. I get it—it is a really difficult situation. There are 2,700 kids. How do you track 2,700 separate adjustment needs? How do you remember who has got what?

There are systemic problems in that regard. I get that completely. However, there is also a fundamental lack of understanding of what neurodivergence is. That is not teachers' fault either, because they are not trained in it. They do not have that experience—I think that there are four hours of training in the standard undergraduate degree about what it is like to be neurodivergent, and that is informed by a deficit paradigm.

I just wanted to let you hear what that email said, because it is important that you understand what neurodivergent parents and neurodivergent young people are dealing with in a system that should not do that. We have laws and systems that make that approach completely inappropriate, yet there it is in black and white.

The Deputy Convener: Thank you for sharing. Rhoda, do you want to come back in?

Rhoda Grant: That sounds terrible, Dr Lang, and it suggests that not every school is getting the right training, advice and guidance on how they should approach children who are neurodiverse. Are those who are providing that advice and guidance able to comment on how they can make sure the right approach happens?

The Deputy Convener: I see that Marie Harrison wants to come in, as do Gerard Wilkie and Angela Evans.

Marie Harrison: Part of the difficulty is that the approach is extremely individual not only to local authorities but to the cultures in particular schools, which means that issues are being addressed in very different ways. We work with some children and young people who have been referred through the justice system or the children's hearings system soon after they have stopped attending school, but similar cases in other local authority areas are never referred to us. Non-attendance can therefore have quite far-reaching ramifications depending on where someone lives.

Next, I would like to address reasonable adjustments. What does that actually mean? What is considered reasonable is quite open to interpretation. Often, parents will have one idea, schools will have another and—believe you me—children will have their own idea of what is reasonable for them. We really need to listen to children and put them at the absolute centre of discussions about support for them.

Following that, we need to think about who the adjustments that are put in place are actually for. A wonderful member of my team, who works directly with children and young people, has been out working with a lot of children who sit alone in classrooms, isolated and away from their peers. She says that there could just as well be a brick wall instead of a door in the room, because those children become segregated within the school community. They feel bored, they feel stupid, and they feel that they do not belong. However, such an arrangement can still be considered a reasonable adjustment for that particular young person.

The Enquire staff also gave me examples of support being put in place but then being removed once the consensus is that things have improved. That can be quite detrimental as the young person gets to a point where they feel that they are actually achieving, but then reducing that level of support causes another crash. There was a case in which the removal of the one-to-one support that a young person received at lunch time and break time led to police involvement, because the young person fell through the cracks and was completely unable to cope.

We have examples of families who are struggling financially and emotionally because the children can access education for only one and a half hours a day. In one case, the parent was told that their child could come in for an hour and a half a day, but the parent needed to be available to the school at all times. That means that that parent—a single parent—is now unable to hold down a job. We have endless lists of such situations.

I cannot stress enough that, for the great majority of the time, local authorities are doing what they can, and teachers are doing as much as they can, but, in terms of the whole environment, I come back to my point about the gap between what we should be offering and what we are able to offer.

My main point is that support should not readily be removed once it is in place. If it is working, that is a good thing. One of our young advisers called Nova, who is a wonderful neurodivergent young person, told me about a situation where she was unable to attend school. Her emotional wellbeing was more important than her attending at that point in time. When she slowly started reintegrating into the school environment a plan was drawn up and reasonable adjustments were made, and she was told that support would be available to her. When she found herself at crisis point and went to the hub where she had been told she could access that support, she was turned away and told to come back an hour and a half later because that was her scheduled slot for support. Young people's emotional distress does not follow a schedule, so the reasonable adjustment that was put in place was, in effect, a paper exercise, and that young person who needed to access support was told to go away and come back later.

We need to think carefully about what reasonable adjustments mean and who they are working for. Are they working for the individual young person? Has that young person said, "Yes, this is what I need," or have those adjustments come into existence because something needs to be on paper? Are they actually doing what they set out to do?

Gerard Wilkie: I want to pick up on Jason Lang's point about the four hours of training for teachers. I am a secondary-trained schoolteacher. I work in a special school in Edinburgh. That is the training I have had as well. The difference is that I have an autism diagnosis myself, so I have lived experience. The whole reason that I wanted to become a teacher was to give other learners the education that I did not have when I went to school. I left school nearly 40 years ago now, and sometimes I feel that we have not moved with the times.

Scotland needs a long-term resourcing strategy. We also need action to reduce class sizes and significantly enhance the availability of specialist ASN and support and expertise in our schools. The reality for teachers is that in a class of 33 children, which is the typical class size in a mainstream school, more than 14 of those children will have an additional support need of some sort. Some might have a dual diagnosis, and they will all vary in terms of complexity. Now, can four hours of training cover that?

Since 2007, there has been a sevenfold increase in the number of pupils requiring support, and investment in education has not kept pace with that rising level of need. The number of specialist ASN teachers in Scotland has fallen by 20 per cent over the same period, which has removed a valuable source of specialist support and advice from classroom teachers. The consequences of that situation are far reaching and profound. For young people, it means that far too many of them are not having their individual needs adequately met in the classroom, despite the best efforts of teachers. For teachers, the results include an excessive workload and increases in stress and stress-related illnesses as they struggle to deal with the diverse demands that are placed upon them. Lastly, for society, it means that a growing number of young people are becoming frustrated and disengaged from education, with serious long-term consequences for all concerned. That is all that I have to say on that point.

Marie McNair: Gerard, is it your belief that teacher training for these situations should be led by folk who have autism or ADHD themselves? Certainly, the view of the lived experience panel whose meeting I attended last night was that the training must come from folk who have such experience. You mentioned four hours of training. Is that yearly? What is your experience?

Gerard Wilkie: I can see the benefits of autism-led training; I cannot see that it is always going to work.

I work in a special school in Edinburgh for learners who, like me, have a diagnosis of autism. That gives me a unique insight as a teacher. Basically, the learners and I are on the same wavelength—we are on the same radio channel all the time—and we know how to work together. Thankfully, I have that lived experience. If that was not the case, my training would probably have to be self led. As teachers, we can have training on additional support needs during in-service training sessions and so on, which helps us, but, if you go to a teacher training college, the ASN training there is minimal. It is basically a case of learning on the job.

I do not know whether that has answered your question. It is certainly something that needs looking at.

10:15

Marie McNair: That is helpful. I will put my question out to the room if anybody else wants to share their view.

Maura Kearney: Although it would be really valuable to have lived experience—and we do have psychologists who have an identification of neurodivergence, for example—we tend to use materials from NAIT. As I have mentioned, it connects with people who have lived experience, which in turn means that the materials that we use have been ratified by groups of autistic young people and adults. There is training on the transition for young people going into primary 1—the initial experience of school. There is also wider training about any transition, and there is specific training for secondary school. The training is neuro affirming and, as I said before, is about trying to change attitudes. It is not a deficit-driven model; it looks at the profile of need and how to support that.

Marie Harrison: Lived experience, especially that of children and young people, is a fantastic place to start. None of us here knows what it is like to be a neurodivergent young person today, and none of us has had to go through the Covid pandemic in the way that they did, with all the added pressures from social media, screen time and all the things that young people today are trying to navigate. Training must start with people who genuinely know what they are talking about because they are living it.

A member of my staff team who works closely with a specialist school in Edinburgh—together, we are developing training on complex needs, which I hope will cover all of Scotland one day—told me that the staff there had told her that it is not possible to get a placement in a specialist setting as part of teacher training. Specialist settings are hubs of knowledge; there is so much good practice and good stuff happening in those settings that could be transferable and could be pulled out of that context and brought into mainstream settings. However, there has to be an avenue for that. There has to be a way for prospective teachers to go in and access that knowledge.

I want to bang the drum for the My Rights, My Say young advisers and inclusion ambassadors, both of which are groups of young people operating within Children in Scotland. They work really hard to provide people around them with advice and information based on their lived experience. I suggest looking them up or getting in touch with them, because they are phenomenal. They are very feisty—they will tell you everything that you want to hear and a lot of things that you might not want to.

Marie McNair: Responsibility for taking the right approach surely has to sit with individual schools, too. If they identify a need, they should provide training through in-service training days or whatever.

Dr Lang: On that point, the figure that Gerard said that I had mentioned is from the undergraduate curriculum of the University of Glasgow. It is four hours, but that is four hours of inclusive training that is meant to include everything. Among the findings was the fact that training is sometimes bought in by individual schools, as you suggested, but that there is an issue with quality assurance for that. There is no kitemark standard or similar that schools could look for to allow them to say, “Well, they’ve got this accreditation, so we should use this provider.” That is a bit of an issue; it means that the quality of the training might fluctuate.

Young people’s experiences are really important, and we have given some thought to how we can hear them in a safe way, because only some young people are able to front up and talk like that. However, there are now other ways in which we can hear from them, including by animating voices. NAIT has done that very effectively; it has animated a young person's voice so that their points can be made appropriately without their having to appear on camera or in a film.

There is one other thing that I would say about lived experience. I know that it is absolutely vital. In the autism community, you can feel a bit like a guinea pig; people talk about you and tell you what you are and what you are supposed to be. It is one of the reasons for hearing from somebody who has lived in that situation and walked in those shoes.

The danger of using anecdotes, though, is that people can think that N equals one—there is a risk that they will just say, "That's my experience, so it's everybody's experience." Even quite famous autistic advocates can fall into that trap. As a result, when we design, or even just think about, having this kind of curriculum for teachers, we must be careful to ensure that it is broad and representative and that we do not hear just the noisy voices; we have to hear the quiet ones, too. There are ways in which that can be done, with a bit of thought.

Marie McNair: Who else would benefit from training? Would it be folk working with children? Should awareness training be carried out in schools, and for everyone who works there?

Dr Lang: Four levels were proposed in our framework. One was policy, which I have talked about today, and among those that were more attainable was culture change driven by lived experience, by people understanding things, by a shift away from a deficit focus, and by understanding what it is really like to be a kid. I think that if we really understood what it was like to be a neurodivergent child, the email that was mentioned earlier would never have been written. I do get the intent behind that email, and I do understand what it is about—it is about meeting targets of attendance—but I would never have written it, because I would have seen what it would do. You cannot know what you do not know. For me, that would be the benefit of having such understanding.

We have talked very clearly about the whole-school community, but that is not just teachers. We have talked about teachers, but they are not the whole school. There is the school leadership, the teachers, the janitors, the facilities people, the catering staff and the administration staff. They are all involved in the culture—and then there are the parents and the kids. How do the kids get their voice across? How do they understand? We talked about that, too.

The other thing that we are interested in—and this speaks to Gerard Wilkie's point—is that teachers are incredibly stressed, and it is really difficult to come at an issue from a mentalising point of view when you are super stressed. Stress deliberately narrows your view; that is why we have anxiety, and why we become very acutely aware of just one point. Teachers are also the only staff group working with children full time who do not have, for example, psychologically informed reflective practice space. Why not? Would that be helpful? That is something that we want to investigate, too.

Those were the four levels of what we thought might be a potential solution to this problem in the long term.

Marie McNair: Does anybody else want to come in?

Angela Evans: I want to pick up on a couple of points that have already been raised. I agree with Marie Harrison that there needs to be a clearer definition of reasonable adjustments, and I also think that such adjustments need to be reframed through the lens of access rather than advantage.

I go back to the point made by Lynne Binnie and Hannah Axon about the physical environment. My experience has been that one of the barriers for our children at Donaldson's has not really been the curriculum—it has been the environment in which they were trying to learn. I agree with Lynne that teachers are amazingly creative and will do absolutely everything to meet the needs of learners in their classrooms, but overwhelming and unpredictable environments increase anxiety and stress for neurodivergent learners, and they do lead to reduced attendance.

An area for development, therefore, is building standards, because future buildings need to be neuro affirming and sensory aware; they need to consider the lighting, the acoustics, visual calm and the flexible use of spaces. At Donaldson's, we follow the National Autistic Society's SPELL—or structure, positive, empathy, low arousal or level of regulation and links—framework. Our environment is wholly low arousal. Again, this touches on what Lynne Binnie has said about universal access; if we can get that right, it impacts on all of our learners, not just those who are neurodivergent, and it reduces reliance on reactive adjustments.

As for training, I think that teachers need far more than a one-off session. Training needs to be sustained, and they need to have time and access to specialists. Without that, you just do what you know, or you do your best with what you have. Without that sort of sustained professional development, schools are more likely to rely on exclusionary practices to meet unmet need or to cope with system pressures.

Hannah Axon: I have a number of points to make, if that is okay. The issue of teacher training has come up a couple of times. I am looking at my education colleague, but I think that teachers get 35 hours of continuing professional development a year. There is a lot of demand on that time. It is a question of ensuring that the training meets the needs of the job and of the individual. When we are thinking about what the training should look like, we need to keep that in mind.

A question was asked about how we can ensure that information on training and resources gets out to schools and teachers. I mentioned the review of the implementation of the neurodevelopmental specification. One issue that is being considered in that context is what resources are available. We have had discussions about the resources that are available from NAIT and NHS Education for Scotland and how we might disseminate those further, and those discussions are still afoot.

An interesting point was made about attendance. In that context, we need to think about wider policy coherence. There has been a big drive on attendance following the Covid pandemic, to make sure that our children get the most out of education in our education settings. As we look at those different pieces of policy, we need to think about—at all levels—what that means from a neurodevelopmental perspective and what factors we should take account of as we look forward. I am thinking about issues such as reduced class contact time and maintenance of teacher numbers. We need to fully take into account the potential impacts on our children with additional support needs, including the children and young people we are talking about today.

The Deputy Convener: We move to questions from Pam Gosal.

Pam Gosal: I thank everyone for the information that they have provided so far.

Education is key to helping children to develop the skills that they will need later in life to become responsible adults. Obviously, autistic children face additional barriers, many of which we have heard about today, including social difficulties, sensory overload and academic struggles and obstacles. In addition, such children are often bullied and excluded by their peers. What can we do to ensure that autistic and other neurodivergent children are given an equal opportunity in life? A lot has been said about the difficulties, but I want to focus more on the bullying side and the exclusion of such children by their peers.

Dr Lang: That is an insightful question. We spend a lot of time thinking about all the bad stuff, but we do not think about how we can maximise the good stuff.

I gave the example of LGBTQI people as a comparison. I can build a very good case for saying that, in general, neurodivergent children and young people are among the most discriminated-against groups of individuals in the country. The discrimination is still at a level at which it is insidious, is not called out, is not noted, and there is no legal framework around it. Although we still have massive problems with discrimination on ethnic grounds and discrimination in relation to gender and sexuality, there are frameworks in place that have perhaps reduced that. I am not an expert on whether that is the lived experience, but at least there has been some societal shift that has allowed more parity for other minority groups. That remains conspicuously absent for neurodivergent people.

I am aware that I can ramble, so I will try to be brief. The short answer is that culture change is required. There needs to be a national understanding that neurodivergence is not a bad thing, that autism spectrum disorder and ADHD are misnomers, that we would expect there to be variations, that people can be different and that that is okay.

10:30

There has to be work on that. We have to get away from the idea of a deficit—the idea that there is something wrong with people and they are a problem. We need to move to affirming approaches whereby neurodivergent children can celebrate their identity. Otherwise, there will continue to be a massive loss from an economic point of view. In these troubling times, we need to consider what the point of neurodivergent people in the population is. All populations survive because of their diversity. If we were all exactly the same—if we were all clones—we would not survive. We need the diversity that is designed into the population and is meant to be there.

What do neurodivergent kids bring? Rather than talking about academic difficulties, let us say that we do not always learn typically. There is no association between autism and a learning problem. There is a relatively common overlap between autism and learning disability, which are separate things that happen to exist in the same person. However, someone who is just an autistic person, if such a person exists, does not actually have a problem with learning. They have a problem with engaging with a system that is not designed to help them to learn. Reframing that social aspect is really important.

Let us consider what autistic people are good at. We are good at pattern recognition, at seeing things from a different perspective, and at understanding situations where other people get stuck in a social mould. We are not in that social mould, so we do not get stuck with people saying, “This is what is expected of you.” What do ADHD people bring? They bring spontaneity, creativity and an appetite for risk. All those things are super vital in appropriate numbers within economic spheres and businesses. Some silicon valley companies actively recruit neurodivergent people for that very reason. At a time when we are stagnating, we need to have different points of view and different skill sets. If someone is autistic, they would be an excellent police officer, generally speaking, because they have an eye for detail and a sense of right and wrong.

Those are the kinds of things that we need to be thinking about. What are the positive niches where neurodivergent people fit and do well? What is the point of neurodivergent people in society? What can we do to maximise that, along with reducing the stigma? The stigma is huge. I am the only out autistic child and adolescent psychiatrist in Scotland. In psychiatry, we have policies that say that we do not stigmatise, but we do absolutely stigmatise. I know colleagues who are almost certainly autistic but would be far too scared to say that in case it affected their job and they were not allowed to be employed any more. People ask, “How can you be autistic and be a psychiatrist?” All that stigma and all that rubbish permeates throughout, and that is the kind of thing that society needs to get rid of.

A broad church and a broad range of approaches are needed to allow neurodivergent people to actually integrate and flourish because, at the moment, they are actively set aside, for all the reasons that we have discussed this morning.

Hannah Axon: I am, maybe unhelpfully, going to answer a question with a question, but I wonder whether some of the rising demand for diagnosis is due to the fact that we are beginning to see the start of that cultural shift. We are seeing self-stigma reducing and people being more comfortable about coming forward and saying, “I need support with this” or “What does this mean for me?” I wonder whether our children and young people in our primary school settings would have quite the same reflections and experiences as those who are in late high school or have moved on. We maybe need to question where we are at the moment, given what our younger children in particular are experiencing.

There is an issue with the communications that we are putting out into the public sphere around neurodevelopment. When we did the review, quite a lot came through about social media, which is potentially driving some of the asks on diagnosis and assessment, because children and young people are recognising themselves in social media. That is a real positive in terms of awareness raising and making sure that people get the support that they need, although we also have a responsibility to consider the misinformation that is out there and the potential negatives that social media brings when we think about the way that children and young people communicate with one another.

The Deputy Convener: Angela Evans wants to come in, and then I will go back to Pam Gosal.

Angela Evans: At a classroom level, if we want to shift barriers and attitudes, we need a rights-based approach that moves the focus from the child to the environment and the system that they are in. In my opinion, the barriers are systemic and structural; they are not individual. Children with ASN are five times more likely to be excluded from school, which suggests a structural inequity and not an individual or family issue.

The Deputy Convener: Sorry, Pam, but before I bring you back in, Marie Harrison wants to come in on that point.

Marie Harrison: I will try to be quick.

Forty-three per cent of children have additional support needs and 10 to 20 per cent of the population are neurodivergent in one way or another, so we are not talking about a tiny add-on. Children with additional support needs are a vibrant part of our schools and society. We need to start with the culture change that Jason Lang talked about. We need to consider not just educating some people, but educating everybody and finding an education system that works for every individual child. Neurotypical children will not suffer if we put things in place to support neurodivergent children and young people. No one will come to harm if we become more flexible and think about sensory overload, social interaction and all those things.

Jason Lang talked about celebrating all the wonderful skills that neurodivergent children and young people have. At the moment, we are dropping them on the floor. My daughter is nine years old and, in January alone, she read five really large novels—1,800 pages. That is a wonderful thing, but part of her thinks that, potentially, something about her is not right. However, that is not the case—she is exactly who she needs to be and who she is meant to be, and that needs to be celebrated. That is a massive skill to have—I could not read four novels in that time if you paid me to do it. We need to celebrate that and we need to teach children to celebrate the unique differences and varied abilities and skills that our young people have.

The presumption of mainstreaming is a good thing—I will die on that hill. It is really healthy and good for our children and young people to be together and learn from one another, but it needs to be resourced properly. The environment needs to be appropriate so that children and young people do not go in with a feeling that they have to wait to fail so that they can access the support that they need to thrive. However, that is what it feels like.

Parents tell us time and again that they feel as if they are fighting. They use militant language to describe how they feel. In talking about their relationship with schools, they talk about fighting, battling and combat, all of which have very negative connotations. We need to build relationships with schools for the children and their peers, and for the parents and carers. We need to celebrate diversity rather than be frightened of it.

Pam Gosal: We have heard that there is inconsistent support for neurodivergent pupils across Scotland, which leads to a postcode lottery. For example, why should an autistic child living in East Dunbartonshire and a child living in the Highlands not receive the same level of support? What steps should be taken to address that?

Dr Binnie: I do not disagree with that point. That is the nature of the system in which we work. Local authorities determine how resources are deployed to schools, which can impact on the types of interventions that children and young people can access. Headteachers in our schools also have a decision on how they allocate resource. We see increasing need. To pick up on a point that Marie Harrison made, we see areas of deprivation. Headteachers have to decide how to allocate the resource in their schools to prioritise the children with the greatest need. That is a reality of the system, and it impacts on the definition of a reasonable adjustment. Reasonable adjustments have to take into account the resource that is available.

That is the system for allocating resources that we currently operate in Scotland. They come from the Scottish Government to local authorities, and then go from local authorities to schools. It is not for ADES or headteachers to determine whether there need to be changes to that system. However, that is, in large part, why there are differences in the resources that are available for children and young people with additional support needs.

Hannah Axon: To add to that, beyond education, the resources that are available vary significantly across the country. That might be about additional family support in the third sector or the support that the health service offers around neurodiversity. There is variability, which you then have to think about in a school setting and consider how to interact with that.

We often talk about having consistent outcomes rather than consistent approaches. That recognises that, in some areas, you might not be able to totally replicate what you can do elsewhere but, regardless of that, you can support a person to achieve the best outcome and you can try to make the best use of the available resources. For instance, in the Highlands and Islands, you might have to take a different approach to the support that you put in place from the one that you would take in a city, because of the realities of rurality or the staffing in the area. It is important to take into account the need to support consistent achievement of outcomes.

Angela Evans: We need national direction and a shared understanding on data investment. We need thought to be given to provision and access, so that resources are equitably shared across local authorities. We need to consider workforce capacity, so that we have increased and protected investment for our schools. We also just need to lift the lid on the system pressure a little and have whole-system capacity building to build consistency across local authorities.

The Deputy Convener: Pam, do you have anything to add?

Pam Gosal: No. I thank everybody for their responses.

The Deputy Convener: That brings us to the end of our questions. We have covered an awful lot of ground and we have run a wee bit over, so thank you for your patience. Do any of our witnesses want to get anything on the record? Is there anything that you wanted to make sure that you said? I will give you one last opportunity.

Angela Evans: I will just quote a parent who told me that they want their child to thrive in school, not just survive. That is what we need to aim for.

The Deputy Convener: Unless anyone else has any last words, I thank you all very much. You have given us really rich information to consider. Thank you for your time—we really appreciate it.

I suspend the meeting briefly to allow us to change the panels and to give people a wee bit of a break.

10:43

Meeting suspended.

10:53

On resuming—

The Deputy Convener: Welcome back, everyone, and thank you for your patience. We will now move to our second round table, which will focus on the workplace. Before we move to questions from members, I invite everyone to introduce themselves. I will begin, and we will move around the table from my right.

I am Maggie Chapman, deputy convener of the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee, and I am the Scottish Green MSP for the North East Scotland Region.

Fergus McMillan (Skills Development Scotland): I am head of equality and diversity at Skills Development Scotland across service delivery, including the careers service, the modern apprenticeship programme, foundation apprenticeships and our work with employers and skills planning.

Marie McNair: I am a constituency MSP representing Clydebank and Milngavie. Prior to my election as an MSP, I was a councillor in West Dunbartonshire for 19 years.

Jill McAlpine (Federation of Small Businesses Scotland): I am a business owner and an employer representing the Federation of Small Businesses in Scotland. I also have an ADHD brain and am a perimenopausal woman, so I have lots to say on the subject.

David Cameron (Scottish Union of Supported Employment): I am from the Scottish Union of Supported Employment, which is the national representative body for organisations that support disabled people into paid work.

Mia Preston (Federation of Small Businesses Scotland): I am a teacher, retired foster carer and now a neurodivergent mentor, and I am representing the FSB.

Alan Thornburrow (Salvesen Mindroom Centre): Good morning. I am the chief executive of Salvesen Mindroom Centre. We are a national neurodiversity charity that supports children and young people. We also advise businesses on widening access and supporting progression through the workplace for neurodivergent individuals.

Paul McLennan: I am the MSP for East Lothian and, like Marie McNair, prior to my election as an MSP, I was 15 years a councillor—in my case, in East Lothian.

Marek Zemanik (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development): Hi, good morning, everybody. I am the senior public policy adviser for the UK nations at the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development. We are a professional body for human resources and people development.

The Deputy Convener: We now go to the witnesses who are online.

Chirsty McFadyen (Fraser of Allander Institute): Hi. I am an economist at the Fraser of Allander Institute at the University of Strathclyde. For the past couple of years, I have been leading our learning disabilities employment research, which has now expanded to include neurodivergence.

Rhoda Grant: I am a Scottish Labour MSP for the Highlands and Islands region.

Pam Gosal: I am a Scottish Conservative regional MSP for the west of Scotland.

The Deputy Convener: Thank you all. You are all very welcome and I really appreciate you attending this morning. We will now move to questions from members, and I will start with Pam Gosal

Pam Gosal: Employment is the best solution to poverty, yet only 29 per cent of autistic people are employed, compared to more than 80 per cent of the general public. Unfortunately, many employers do not have sufficient understanding of what it means to be neurodivergent, leading to poor workplace experiences for and discrimination against neurodivergent staff. What should employers be doing to encourage autistic people to join and remain in the workforce?

Mia Preston: I have been carrying out research into what some of the big companies, including Microsoft and EY, are doing. Interestingly, they start with the recruitment process because, in many cases, that process gets in the way of neurodivergent people accessing work. Neurodivergent people are allocated a dedicated team that is with them all the way through the process and stay with them once they are employed. There is also transparency. It is about communication and language, not just for the person who could be employed but for the employer. Things are really simplified. There are accommodations as well, which are clearly communicated to both sides. There is training for the staff who handle onboarding, and they do not rely on social interviews. Also, they are looking at their interview methods and are using shadowing so that they can get a more general idea of things.

However, in my experience, change begins when people start recognising why neurodivergent people are a real benefit to the companies. Once that happens, their willingness to make changes to the interview processes and onboarding becomes something that everybody is invested in.

David Cameron: We need to educate employers so that they understand the diverse range of talents that exist and that organisations that are not open to everyone in the community end up missing out on a great deal. I emphasise that it is for employers to build their capacity in that regard—it is not the taxpayer's job to do it for them, particularly when it comes to private businesses. They need to test what they do and to consult with neurodivergent people. Let us take the example of recruitment. I expect that they will discover different processes by talking to people and finding out what works for them—and what does not.

The last time that I was before the committee, I used the example of digital recruitment, which is how lot of employers recruit nowadays. Everything is online, including pretty much all recruitment. We carry out an exercise with employers in which a group of disabled people use a real job application to test the system. That allows them to find out what all the barriers and bugs are, as well as the things that prevent disabled people from completing an application. The employer is then provided with a report and an action plan to take forward.

It is remarkable that organisations make workplace changes, such as moving their recruitment online, but never test them. They never check with disabled people and neurodivergent people whether the process works. It is great that, once people go through the recruitment process, employers can go back and have those conversations about what worked for them. They can also ask why the person chose the job. That is important, because it is not just the employer that is making a choice; the person is making a choice to work for that organisation. What was the organisation doing right, and what lessons can be applied to other organisations?

Jill McAlpine: For my day job, I advise businesses on business growth. I like to look at the issue from the other angle—that is, as has been mentioned, that neurodivergence can unlock so much more divergence of thought. Time and time again, we see that putting inclusion at the heart of performance works. Google’s project Aristotle found that the number 1 driver of high performance in teams is psychological safety. Furthermore, there is well-cited research from Amy Edmondson at Harvard Business School that says that uncertainty and friction are the biggest hidden cost to businesses. If we look at the issue with a business mindset, it makes more sense for us to focus on creating the conditions for a high-performing team. If you do not deal with those three elements in your workplace, it will be a lot more uncomfortable for somebody who is autistic or someone like me who has ADHD. Most people do not want to have that conversation with you, so you should create psychological safety in your workplace, and ensure that you reduce friction and uncertainty. Let people know what the unwritten rules and the conversation clips are.

Alan Thornburrow: I will build on that. Psychological safety is one of the key pillars when it comes to disclosure around neurodivergence. That is not a goal—it does not mean that everyone must share how they are wired and how they process and experience the world. However, doing so helps, in many respects.

We know that the population prevalence of neurodivergence is between 10 and 20 per cent. In our experience, disclosure in the workplace is anaemic—it is under 5 per cent. That is driven by a few things, such as stigma, but fear and discrimination sit beneath that. There is evidence from multiple sources, including CIPD, that speaks to that.

11:00

We have done a lot of work with neurodivergent employees—and with their employers—that has involved considering what could have been better when they moved into the workplace and tried to progress through it. Psychological safety was raised as a key point, and storytelling at a leadership level was also raised as critical. That is particularly important when driving cultural change and ensuring that it becomes something that the entire organisation owns.

Yes, recruitment is an issue, but going further back, the basic principles that we have seen are about education. We tend to find that people do not exclude neurodivergent people from a place of ill will; they do so from a place of lacking understanding. The more that you can educate and upskill people, and make neurodiversity everybody’s business, the better. That leads to better conversations and, generally speaking, greater disclosure, and then, I hope, more enlightened approaches to all the things that Jill McAlpine talked about—productivity, business growth, creativity and much more.

Marek Zemanik: I agree with just about everything that has been said so far and just want to add a little bit more evidence to some of the arguments. On the business benefits front, we did a big report back in 2024 called “Neuroinclusion at work”, which was based on an employer survey and an employee survey. That report showed very clearly that employers who invest additional resources and put more effort into neuro-inclusion later report not only positive organisational outcomes but also positive individual outcomes around employee wellbeing and employee performance. On the organisational front, they also report much better staff retention as well as recruitment opportunities from a wider talent pool. The evidence shows that supporting neurodivergence and neuro-inclusion in organisations is linked to positive business outcomes.

To directly answer the question about how you do that, it starts at the recruitment stage. For example, employers must ensure that job descriptions are clear and short, and if they are willing to discuss and offer reasonable adjustments, that has to be made very clear from the outset. They must then provide those reasonable adjustments, which can range from providing interview questions in advance to giving applicants more time for written tasks and so on.

That is the recruitment stage, but there is also on-going in-work support. Offering reasonable adjustments is part of that, but quite a few people have mentioned organisational culture, which is also a huge part. Organisational culture, linked to senior leadership, has a real role to play. Psychological safety, as Jill McAlpine mentioned, is extremely important for neurodivergent individuals.

One thing that has perhaps not been mentioned quite as explicitly—we will perhaps come to it later in the session—is people management capability and capacity, which is also linked to the education piece. That involves ensuring that managers understand what neurodiversity is and feel comfortable taking a clear, human-centric approach to people management and speaking with employees. That is absolutely key and crucial.

Fergus McMillan: I echo a lot of what has been said so far. We also work with employers. One business owner, who I suppose went on a bit of a journey around neurodivergence and inclusion more broadly, said that understanding the lived experience of your own team can be used as a starting point to break down the fear that might exist in an organisational culture. She also said that you have to understand the culture and ethos that you are trying to create as a business or employer, and that you need to be kind in how you implement such approaches and culture changes.

On lived experience, my own organisation recently established an employee network group for disabled colleagues that has a particular focus on neurodivergent colleagues. Going back to the point about testing approaches, we tested an approach to the provision of neuro-inclusive recruitment practices—giving interview candidates questions in advance for a recent young talent recruitment—and we have extended that pilot so that we can learn as we go, with a view to implementing it across the organisation as a whole.

My final point in relation to apprenticeships in particular is that we have invested a lot of energy in working with learning providers—contracted learning providers in the modern apprenticeship programme, in particular—on spending time at that needs assessment point with new apprentices to establish what their needs are, and on trying to reduce the stigma that undeniably exists about disclosure in the first place, to increase the confidence of apprentices so that they can be clear with their employers about what would support them in the workplace.

The Deputy Convener: Thanks very much, Fergus. Pam, is there anything that you want to pick up on?

Pam Gosal: No, thank you, convener. My apologies—I have to leave for an appointment now—but thank you so much, everybody, for your responses.

The Deputy Convener: Thank you, Pam. Rhoda, I know that you are interested in some of this, too, so I will bring you in now.

Rhoda Grant: We have heard about how small adjustments can make a huge difference for people, but they are often not put in place, because people do not understand or do not have awareness of neurodiversity. What kind of small adjustments could be made? Can you give examples of where that has proved successful? Should such adjustments be in place all the time, without people having to disclose that they have a neurodiversity?

Jill McAlpine: I have a local example for you, Rhoda. I recently went through a procurement process with Highlands and Islands Enterprise. You will all know the procurement system well. There was a form that appeared at the last minute, and, with the cognitive overload, my application ended up being one minute late. Naturally, I raised the matter with HIE, and, to their credit, the head of procurement and the head of the fair work working group at HIE met with me and we went through it.

That whole process would have been so different for me if HIE had just had a simple content sheet that explained where these bits of forms were. That would have been at no cost to it. Because all the information was so dense, there was a form that just appeared that I did not know anything about. I have an ADHD brain, so I will always do things when it is near the deadline. To me, 45 minutes is like a lifetime. I think that HIE could have had that information available. If it had shown that information in three different ways—the dense information for the people who like the detail; a content sheet for somebody who needed the step-by-step instructions; and a video for somebody who learned in that way—that would have made the experience a whole lot different.

The fact that I missed the deadline had an economic impact on me, and I dare not think how many people just do not go near the procurement process because of the experience. It does not have to be anything fancy—the changes can be simple. It is about listening. The other important part of that conversation is that it needs to happen before the process starts. It is not about asking afterwards, “How could we have made that better?” We have equality impact assessments and everything else, so why was it like that in the first place?

To its credit, the way that HIE dealt with the matter was fantastic, because it took the feedback and it is going to work on it.

The Deputy Convener: Thanks for sharing that, Jill.

David Cameron: Earlier, we heard mention of disclosure, which always seems such a difficult word, because it feels as though are you are admitting something. I know that it gets quite problematic at work.

We have recently been doing a lot of work around conversations. It is Scottish Government-funded work for a campaign called “Why are you asking?” It is about people—including managers and employers—having the courage to ask questions and initiate conversations and maybe ask the daft question or the thing that you are worried about asking. It is also about people feeling safe to have the conversation with their supervisors and managers in the workplace, knowing that it is safe to do that. We are talking about psychological safety—people need to feel that it is really safe to do that and that it is okay.

There needs to be the understanding that every single person in a workplace has different needs. We all have things that we are confident about doing in our work, and we have things that we are muddling through—although I am sure that is not the case for MSPs. We manage our way through things, and we have a coping mechanism to get through them. Educating employers about the fact that it is not that different from what they are doing in making adjustments for other people and promoting conversations is not that difficult.

Another thing that we are dipping our toe into—colleagues around the table might know more about this—is reverse mentoring. Senior figures in organisations are being buddied up with disabled people and people who are neurodivergent, and that is about facilitating the conversations between them. There is a trusting relationship and people can ask for and get advice. They can ask, “Am I doing this right? Am I saying the right thing? Do you have ideas and thoughts?” That might be another useful tool.

The Deputy Convener: Thank you, David. MSPs muddle through an awful lot. Mia Preston is next.

Mia Preston: This came up a little bit in the earlier session on education: environments that benefit neurodivergent people benefit everybody. They do not disadvantage anyone; they are just best practice.

A lot of companies already have online training management systems, and if we add things to that, that is how we can get there. I have seen infographics that show different options quickly and pictorially about, for example, what happens if somebody has just disclosed something to you. Those are simple things that we can provide and they benefit everybody.

We should be looking not at people opting in but at people opting out, so that they do not have to disclose. If we can take that out of the environment, we will have something that will work for everybody.

The Deputy Convener: Thanks, Mia. The point from this morning that you highlighted is clear. Equality and inclusion are good for everyone. They do not disadvantage.

Mia Preston: We need to get away from the idea of adjustments and accommodations. Why can we not just provide an environment that works for everyone?

The Deputy Convener: Yes, and make that systemic change.

Alan Thornburrow: I will pick up on the closing comments from the earlier session. This is about people thriving, whatever that might mean to them. Exactly as in the points that have just been made, it is about understanding, human to human, how we can thrive. This is not a deficiency. Far too often, we still have a deficit model when we think about neurodiversity. Our job, and that of many of us around this table and far beyond, is to work hard to reframe that. It is about potential. We all have unique skills to contribute.

To come to Rhoda Grant’s question, the specific examples are many and wide-ranging, but the basic premise is that the adjustments should be designed in for everybody. Whether it is assistive technology or an interview process in which questions are shared in advance—or much more beyond—if it is offered up universally, I will not feel that I have to say anything about how I experience the world, because I can access the tools that will help me to flourish in the workplace. That is the basic principle here.

There are so many examples, and the key thing is that most of them are very low cost. There is an assumption that all sorts of the things that we need to do are costly, but they are really not—some of them are freely available. However, if the principles can be designed in for everybody, it makes things far more accessible.

The Deputy Convener: Before I come to Marek, I will pick up on the point that measures can be easy to implement and low cost. What is preventing people from doing those things? Is it a lack of awareness? Is it fear? Is it a combination of a range of different things?

Alan Thornburrow: I do not think that it is fear. A lot of the misunderstanding, stereotyping and stigma around neurodiversity gets in the way. We have found that, when we begin to engage with employers, without exception we quite quickly build better understanding and awareness. That leads to more human-to-human conversations. It is then a natural process for organisations to start thinking about much more than policies and more about how they create high-performing environments and environments in which people can access the tools and resources that they need. The lack of awareness is probably the key thing. That is what we are all trying to tackle.

Mia Preston: One of the biggest issues is the double empathy problem. We have a group of people who are swimming and a group of people who are climbing mountains, and they are both understanding each other's experience through the experience that they are having. We need to get to a person-to-person understanding, while understanding that there is a gap in understanding. We need to work on our empathy and on anticipating what the other person is going to need. We really need to work on the double empathy problem.

11:15

Marek Zemanik: I will make a point about legislation. The legal duty to make reasonable adjustments is linked to the definition of disability in the Equality Act 2010, and it is important to make a distinction between disability and neurodivergence more broadly. Many neurodivergent people, if not most, would meet the definition of disability—but not all of them would.

A second issue is that many neurodivergent people will not consider themselves as having a disability, regardless of whether they would meet the definition.

A third issue, which has already been mentioned, concerns disclosure. People are sometimes not willing to disclose their neurodivergence to their employer.

I am making these points because it can be a bit confusing for employers to navigate the legalities of reasonable adjustments—to bring the discussion back to that question. Our advice would always be to go beyond the legal duty, to try to provide reasonable adjustments for everybody and to have a clear, open conversation with employees about what sorts of things would work for them.

The assumption that reasonable adjustments are very costly is still very common, but there are examples of easy and cheap things that can be done to support neurodivergent individuals. Rhoda Grant asked for specific examples. In a physical workplace where there is a hot-desking system, which might not work for some neurodivergent individuals, the employer will provide a fixed desk—a fixed point of work—for the neurodivergent individual, so that they can come into the office and work from the same desk. Providing noise-cancelling headphones is another example.

The most common reasonable adjustment is flexible working. The key challenge with flexible working, from our perspective, is that, partly because of Covid, we have reached a stage where flexible working is simply equated with home and hybrid working, but that is not the case at all. There are many other forms of flexible working, some of which may work much better for neurodivergent individuals, such as flexitime or job sharing.

We still need to improve employers' understanding of what the options are and how they can help employees with various conditions.

Fergus McMillan: I echo what has been said. On your point, convener, about why some simple changes are not being made, I think that it is partly because of a lack of awareness. I think that there is also some fear across a lot of equality and diversity. Some employers fear getting it wrong, which can lead to inactivity.

On Rhoda Grant's question about practical steps, our organisation is piloting giving people interview questions in advance, which I mentioned earlier. That is one example. On a broader point, we often design recruitment processes that prompt people to perform rather than bring their authentic self. I would say to colleagues who have made the point already that simple changes such as those will benefit everyone. My colleagues who have been trialling such an approach in recruitment have asked, "Why weren't we doing this already?" The employer I spoke about earlier said, in relation to inclusive recruitment, that she is not trying to catch people out; she is trying to see the person through the recruitment process, thereby building up a more authentic picture of the people she is trying to select in recruitment.

There is a point or a principle here about shifting away from the pressure being on neurodivergent individuals themselves to seek reasonable adjustments to make the workplace work for them and towards the system-wide change that employers need to make in order to make a difference for all individuals.

Chirsty McFadyen: I completely echo what has been said so far. I have been nodding along in the background here.

As for why employers might not be implementing reasonable adjustments, we have heard that there is a lack of awareness, as everyone has said already. There is a lack of concrete examples. The committee itself is asking for examples, which shows that what an easy reasonable adjustment might be is not common knowledge.

In our research, we have found that employers have asked for case studies, whether live or online, to understand what a simple adjustment might be. We have heard from employers that they do not know where to go for the information or where to start. We have experiences of employers feeling that the guidance that is provided is not concrete or strong enough for them to feel that they can implement it accurately.

On reasonable adjustments, the big thing that we have heard is about the need for flexibility for neurodivergent people. No two neurodivergent people are the same, which means that no two neurodivergent people need the same reasonable adjustment. To give a powerful example from our learning disabilities work, Down Syndrome Ireland worked with Specsavers, which employed one young man with Down syndrome and worked with him repeatedly to get the right job pattern for him so that he could be present at work and work to his full potential. Through that flexible and iterative process, Specsavers has now become the biggest employer of people with Down syndrome in Ireland.

Small changes such as that can make a huge difference. It is also about accepting that there probably will be a bit of trial and error, which is perhaps not as built into our systems as it could be.

The Deputy Convener: There is perhaps also a risk with a trial and error approach that, if you get it wrong, there could be consequences for individuals, whether they are the employees or the employer.

David wants to come in on that.

David Cameron: I want to follow up on the point that Chirsty McFadyen made about employers wanting to find out where they can get information. They want to do things right and they think, “Where do I go? How do I do it right? Where is the information and the education that I need?” The reality is that, in this area, and in many areas related to disability, there is an enormous amount of information—people produce stuff all the time. However, finding it is the hard bit. Every time that I meet civil servants, I tell them that there is a need to pull that stuff together and to have a resource where employers can find good-quality information. That would work wonders, I think.

Jill McAlpine: Everyone has talked about the power of the human-to-human approach. Sometimes, that is the answer, because there is so much information. As Chirsty McFadyen said, if you have met one neurodivergent person, you have met one neurodivergent person. It is about employers having conversations with people about how they work best. We need to flip the conversation and ask, “What is the environment that you need to work best?” rather than, “What do I need to do to meet your needs?” If there is a certain part of work that just does not work for somebody’s brain, you need to consider whether there is a way to get them working on the parts of work that they excel at.

I have ADHD and I understand neurodivergence, and I have got it wrong as an employer. A trial and error approach is hard, but you will always get closer to the answer if you speak to the person who is in front of you.

Mia Preston: We are caught up with getting things wrong, and that starts with education. We are taught that there is a right and a wrong answer instead of being taught that, in order to learn, we should aim to fail as often as we can. One big issue is the punitive culture in which, if somebody does not meet the capabilities or is not performing, we go down the HR route, with the person being on their first warning and so on. We need to move from the punitive to the curious, so that, instead of blaming, we ask questions. We need to start by saying, “Okay, what has happened here? Why has it happened? How are you feeling? What could we, and you, have done differently?” If we had that more curious approach rather than a punitive one, the worry about getting things wrong would disappear. That is an easy cultural change to make.

I know that this sounds weird, but, to bring in something from fostering, we have an approach called PACE, which was developed by Dan Hughes and which stands for playful, accepting, curious and empathetic. Bringing that approach into the workplace can help with the cultural change that moves us out of blame and into curiosity. That is quite an easy change of environment to establish.

Rhoda Grant: I am picking up from what people have said that, rather than having a situation—as we do at the moment—in which a diagnosis is required and lengthy discussion has to take place about what support and adaptations need to be put in place, we should mainstream an approach that involves building provision around the employee, rather than expecting them to fit. That should be in place in every workplace.

We have talked about providing support for employers. Obviously, big companies will have their own internal structure. How can we support employers to assess their workforce and their workplaces to ensure that they are accommodating their staff and able to get the most out of them? How can we provide employers with the skills that they need in that regard? I am thinking about smaller companies, in particular, which might not have the resources to employ people to do that work for them.

Alan Thornburrow: I will pick up on a point that David Cameron made. Certainly when it comes to private employers, I do not see that as being a state function. There is adequate training provision out there. In fact, there is a vast amount of training provision out there for employers.

That is the very work that we do. We meet employers with a view to understanding the culture that they currently have and the culture that they would like to have, which Jill McAlpine spoke about, and how they can move towards that. Much of that involves training, education and work on understanding, but advice also needs to be provided on policies and reasonable adjustments, and people need to be given examples of those. As I have said, there is also the idea of designing in for everybody from the beginning.

There is no lack of information, advice and guidance out there. Perhaps the challenge is navigating through it and finding high-quality, trusted resources.

Marek Zemanik: I want to pick up on the point that Rhoda Grant made about different sizes of organisation. We know that larger organisations are much more likely to make an effort to train their managers to be neuro-inclusive and to have big HR departments and people who are dedicated to such agendas.

However, the situation in small businesses is very different, especially given what has happened in the past few years, when small businesses, in particular, have been under extreme pressures as a result of increases in energy costs, employment costs, national insurance contributions, the national minimum wage and so on. I do not want to speak for my colleagues from the FSB, but small businesses are in survival mode, and it is a challenge for them to find the time to look for the relevant advice, especially if it is difficult to access.

That said, there are gaps in large organisations as well, and there are big differences between the private sector and the public sector. The public sector tends to do a bit better on this agenda. That will be partly linked to public sector bodies having additional specific duties. However, about 40 per cent of organisations say that they do not do any training whatsoever when it comes to neuro-inclusion. That figure comes from the report that I cited earlier.

There are real challenges. Those have been exposed for small businesses, in particular, but large businesses also face them.

Chirsty McFadyen: I have recently done a review of the employability programmes, policies and incentives that are available across Scotland to people who are neurodivergent and people with learning disabilities. What is available is overwhelmingly focused on employability—in other words, getting the employee ready for work—which I do not think is always the most appropriate route for neurodivergent people and people with learning disabilities.

As has been discussed in the previous session and in this one, there are structural problems. Employers need to have a better understanding of neurodivergence, as well as training in how to support people with neurodivergence.

I noticed from the review that the no one left behind funding, for example, is very much directed towards employability rather than employer-focused initiatives.

As others have said, where private businesses can afford to invest in these things, they definitely should, but I go back to the previous point about small businesses being in survival mode. There is potentially a space for Government to support implementation financially, and I would love the no one left behind programme to be broadened out a bit in relation to what local authorities can fund, with more employer-focused initiatives and what Inclusion Scotland refers to as “employerability”. That would be really important, and it would be helpful in getting more employers on track.

The other thing that we have seen in our wider research—I am thinking in particular of our hospitality and in-work poverty project, which I worked on—is that employers really appreciate having a level playing field and the minimum standards being brought up for everybody, because those who perhaps go above and beyond what is statutorily mandated can be negatively impacted by competition and can be undercut by others. Employers, too, have told us that raising the bar legally can be a really good way of getting everybody to move in the right direction.

11:30

Mia Preston: There is also access to work funding. I know that that tends to be more employee focused, but I wonder whether its remit could be opened up; I know, too, that it is more to do with Westminster than Holyrood, but Scottish people can access it. A colleague to whom I have been speaking works with the Department for Work and Pensions, which seems very interested in opening up that funding, so I do not know whether conversations could be happening on that. It is very focused on the individual rather than organisations, which brings us back to the issue of environment.

Fergus McMillan: This is not the point that I was going to make, but following on from what Mia has just said, I know that the access to work scheme has been running sometimes quite large-scale sessions for employers to get a better understanding of the scheme, and we have opened that up to contracted learning providers, those running apprenticeships and employers, too.

As for the area where we have seen the most improvement in both participation and achievement with regard to disability and neurodivergent apprentices, although it is quite difficult to directly attribute what we do to the improvement, one of the things that we think has made the biggest impact is a suite of high-quality continuing professional development learning for training providers and employers, which is informed by lived experience. Lots of that is delivered by some of the third sector organisations from whom you have heard as part of this inquiry and which are here today. The CPD that I referred to initially on effective needs assessment and how to have those conversations with individuals has been, far and away, the most popular CPD that we have done with the learning provider cohort as well as employers. Attendance has been high and it has been evaluated as making a real impact.

Marek Zemanik: I support what Mia Preston said about access to work. It has great potential and is a very positive intervention, but it is chronically underfunded. Demand for the service outstrips supply many times over, and the waiting times for funding to be agreed can lead to job opportunities being lost and so on. I know that very often it all comes down to funding, but in the case of access to work, more funding is most definitely required.

The Deputy Convener: Rhoda, back to you.

Rhoda Grant: I think that my questions have been answered, but what I am taking from the responses is that we should be mainstreaming all of this. Instead of people being sent off to get information at the point of need, they should have that information long before then, so that the barriers do not go up in the first instance. Am I right in that?

The Deputy Convener: The answer seems to be yes. There are lots of nodding heads around the table.

Jill McAlpine: I think, from a business perspective, that we also need to remember the cost of not doing this work, because sometimes we need a reality check. The fact is that people do not stay in employment if the conditions are not met, and it is always important to remember that when we are having these conversations with employers. As Marek Zemanik has said, small businesses are feeling the pressure, and that has a direct impact on all of this, too.

The Deputy Convener: I move on to questions from Marie McNair.

Marie McNair: My line of questioning has been covered, so I will stay out just now and listen to the discussion. I may come in later on.

The Deputy Convener: Paul, over to you.

Paul McLennan: I had the pleasure of visiting the Salveson Mindroom Centre a couple of weeks ago. One of the key things that came through was that the employers that are involved tend to be larger employers. We may be talking about smaller businesses as well, but larger employers have the capacity to take the issue on and organise their organisations around support for those with neurodiversity. How do we ensure that there is a standard approach across different sizes of business? It is easier for a large business to take the issue on. How difficult is it for a small or medium-sized enterprise? That issue came through very clearly. It is important that we have a standard approach.

The other thing to mention in terms of support is how difficulties are picked up. Someone's neurodiversity might not be apparent at the outset of their employment. There were a few examples of people who were subsequently diagnosed with neurodiversity, and that diagnosis changed their relationship with their employer.

Alan Thornburrow: On the first question, we have probably referenced some of that. Perhaps there is a case for more support for smaller employers to access high-quality resources, training and the like. We have seen that make a huge difference to the employers that we advise, but they tend to be larger in the main.

On the second point, when difficulties arise, it helps an awful lot if you have an organisation-level understanding of neurodivergence and the issues that can crop up. Unfortunately, from an employment law perspective, some of the legal businesses that we work with report that more and more issues—which could be performance management related or even something that is quite a few steps beyond that—are going to an employment law team rather than being resolved much earlier internally.

I keep coming back to what we can do, which is to raise awareness and understanding. For organisations that have the capacity and resource, that is great, and there is lots of provision out there. However, perhaps the case that is being made here today, and probably in many other places as well, is that there could be supports in place for smaller businesses.

I will make a final point on that. One of the reasons why we supply and support businesses with training and awareness is that we were supported by the workplace equality fund. That goes back around three years Many employers were not making progress on neurodiversity, but I am pleased to say that that is changing—although not nearly quickly enough, as a lot of the research would bear out. It was one of the mechanisms that made training and support available to organisations but, sadly, it did not continue.

Paul McLennan: The other point—I will open this up to see who else wants to come in—is that a culture change is required. Support is one thing, but do we need legislation? That is something that we need to look at. We can try to change culture and we can provide financial support, but if the culture to do that does not exist in an organisation, it becomes very difficult. Do we need legislation to make sure that all work areas are covered?

David Cameron: To follow on from Alan Thornburrow's point, if you are talking about smaller employers that employ fewer people, they still have a significant piece of work to do in looking at the different models, tools and resources that have been developed. We have made the point that there is lots of stuff out there, and it can often be very challenging to apply that to a smaller business. I do not think that we have figured that out enough yet. There is not enough variety of options and choices for businesses and individuals in many areas for this to work more effectively. I think that there are some challenges there.

Paul McLennan: Is that about lack of awareness, is it that people are aware of the issues but need more help, or is it a bit of both?

David Cameron: If you are a one or two-person operation, you will have to educate yourself about reasonable adjustments, how to go through the process well and so on.

That feels like a big ask for a smaller-sized business, whereas it is not a big ask for an organisation that has an HR department with people who do that kind of thing all the time. The same argument could be made about legislation: legislation applies to everybody, and might place demands on organisations. We definitely want there to be a raising of standards and much greater support for people. We know where we want to get to. However, taking that pathway will have other consequences, and you need to be conscious of that—

Paul McLennan: —and of the balance in terms of regulations hitting small businesses. I get the point.

Marek Zemanik: My general point is that it is difficult to legislate for culture change. I have already mentioned the definition of disability in the Equality Act 2010. That legislation is now 16 years old, and there is probably a case for reviewing it and asking whether it is still appropriate, especially in the context of the legal duty to make reasonable adjustments.

One of your initial questions was about how neurodivergence is picked up. I again come back to the culture of organisations and whether neurodivergence, neurodiversity and neuro-inclusion are talked about. Fergus McMillan mentioned an employee resource group, I think, and a big part of this is about ensuring that organisations get a chance to showcase their work and the resources that they have.

To re-emphasise something that I said in my initial answer, people management capability and capacity are two different things. Capability is having the skills to take a human-centric approach to management, to pick up signals—which might not be verbal signals—and to have a conversation with the employee. Capacity means having the time to manage people properly. All the research that we have done shows that, consistently, around a fifth of all managers will tell you that they just do not have enough time to manage their people well. That then goes back to job quality, broadly speaking: workloads, job design, adequate resources to do the job and so on.

Paul McLennan: I will come to Jill in a moment, but I want first to raise one other point that came through when we went to the Salvesen Mindroom Centre. We are talking about those who are in employment, but the number of people who have neurodiversity and who end up in employment is low. How do we ensure that employers take cognisance of that and are making reasonable adjustments in their selection processes? If the employer does not do that, the individual is already at a disadvantage before they get to the interview stage. I think that that is a really important point. How do we ensure that people who are neurodiverse have the same employment opportunities?

Jill McAlpine: None of it is easy, right? No employer works in a vacuum. We know that there is a lot of stigma and a lot of different opinions around neurodiversity. The issues around national health service provision are causing way more issues in the private sector. All of that is happening, and employers are hearing all about it. It is a confusing situation for everyone. As has been said, funded support is needed for small businesses so that they can work on reasonable adjustments.

An employer will tend to make the easy choice in employing someone, but, as an individual, if I am employing someone, I now think much more about what kind of person I need to have in my team. There is the skill set that the employer needs, but there is also the kind of person who is going to fit right into the culture. That goes back to how we recruit.

A person can make massive differences. An autistic person might be great in some roles that I would not be great in—I would be taking risks left, right and centre. Employers need to think about that, but there should be funded support around them, and it sounds like Alan Thornburrow does a lot of work around that.

Paul McLennan: There has already been some discussion about deficit—almost a neurodiversity deficit. What you say, Jill, is a really important point: neurodiversity is a benefit when it comes to what employers are selecting for and who they are selecting. That is one of the key things that has been mentioned in relation to stigma—and there is still a stigma. Neurodiversity is not a deficit. The key is to acknowledge the benefits that neurodiversity brings to a certain position. That is a really important point.

Jill McAlpine: It is so important. Even thinking about my own career, I wonder what would happen if I thought about the things that I am not good at—the deficits, shall we call them—and I went to an employer and put that list up? When I got my diagnosis, it was a case of “Jill would be good at this” and “Jill is not good at that.” If we just focus on the list of things that I am not good at, all that excellence is lost. It is about flipping the conversation and saying, “What are those people excellent at?” Everyone needs someone who is excellent in their organisation, right?

11:45

Chirsty McFadyen: To pick up on David Cameron’s point about the research that needs to be done, I highlight that, at the Fraser of Allander Institute, we plan to do a larger survey of employers and business leaders related to hiring neurodivergent people and people with learning disabilities. That will include questions on knowledge of neurodivergence and learning disabilities, barriers that employers feel that they are facing and what support employers feel that they need.

I am happy to share the findings of that survey with the committee once they are available. If any of the witnesses would like to contribute to what that survey looks like, I am happy to collaborate on that.

The Deputy Convener: Thanks for that offer, Chirsty. I am sure that people will be in touch with you after the meeting.

Fergus McMillan: Paul McLennan asked whether we need legislation, and I want to echo what has been said on that. I do not have a view on the bill on pathways to diagnosis and all the rest of it, which has not been introduced to Parliament yet. Obviously, to an extent, that sits outside today’s conversation. However, on employment, the report by the Royal College of Psychiatrists talked about the need for a public health campaign that includes an element that is aimed at employers.

We have heard about an assets-based approach for employers relating to the additional skills that neurodivergent people will bring to the Scottish economy, to employers and to the workforce more broadly. There is perhaps space for that to be the case.

In the public sector, there is far more scope for us as employers and in the delivery of our public sector equality duty to improve programmes. The committee has looked at the public sector equality duty more broadly. Some of the stuff that we are talking about today does not happen by itself. Just because a public authority sets equality outcomes, that is not spreading some kind of magic dust that ensures that the outcomes will be achieved. A lot of work then needs to go into achieving the outcomes across the public, third and private sectors. In some senses, we have only scratched the surface of the scope and the potential to make improvements in what we have all described today.

Paul McLennan: The RCP paper talks about a much broader cross-agency approach, which is very much needed. We are focusing on the workplace just now, and we have focused on education. The RCP paper strongly favours a cross-agency approach, so you have made a really good point.

Mia Preston: I have three points. First, rather than try to focus on individual small businesses, why not focus on the professional bodies and other bodies such as the FSB? That would means that you need only have one conversation to access a large group of businesses. If those bodies can then offer training, advice and consultancy, you will have reached small businesses.

The second point is that legislation is for the short term—it is for now—but we need a cultural change, and that starts in schools. We need people to grow up with the idea that everybody contributes in a meaningful way to society. There will be a big burden on businesses if we bring in legislation, but it might bring up standards in the short term while we are trying to carry out the long-term strategy.

My third point goes back to what Jill McAlpine said, and this was also talked about in the earlier session on education. As an alternative to exams, there is an idea of having what is almost a professional passport, which sets out people's strengths. If people could turn up for jobs saying, "I'm really good at deep focus and procedures and systems," or, "I'm really good at creativity and innovation and I know how to use emerging technologies," that would make it easier for the employer to think, "Oh, I know exactly where I can use you." I have seen research that shows that, when that approach is taken, you can get up to 90 per cent retention, so people are not moving on.

Paul McLennan: That is important. As we heard when we visited the Salvesen Mindroom Centre, retention rates are lower among people with neurodiversity. That should not be the case, but it is at the moment.

Alan Thornburrow: To pick up on what Mia Preston said, we have seen that approach in practice and we know that it is effective. A lot of the employers that you might have met are looking at implementing or have already implemented passports, for want of a better term. Under that approach, if you move team, department or function within an organisation, the unique strengths and capabilities that you bring—again, positive, not deficit—go with you, and the things that enable you to thrive accompany you, too, so you do not have to start again.

The point that was made earlier is that people leave people—or stay with people. Organisational culture is part of that, but we often do the most work with people managers and line managers. It is important to equip them appropriately, because they are on the front line—no, that is a terrible term. They are having the conversations with the neurodivergent employees and vice versa. Therefore, they are the ones who benefit the most from tools and resources that enable them to have those conversations and help people flourish.

Jill McAlpine: On the passports, I created the Working With Me method that involves going out and giving presentations on neurodivergence to leaders. When we do that, we find that many of those leaders start to recognise potential neurodivergence within themselves. The issue of education involves not only the employees, because it can open the door to a whole new world for the employers, too.

Fergus McMillan: At the moment, we are user testing a development of the My World of Work platform for young people in particular, but potentially for all people, which involves people having a passport or learner profile that goes with them through their career journey. The idea is that, rather than being built narrowly on qualifications, it will be much more about achievement more broadly and will have a focus on skills and meta-skills as opposed to the narrow way that we might traditionally assess people in the labour market. Also, it would be informed by the needs of employers in the Scottish economy, so that learners can be clear about where they can contribute.

Alan Thornburrow: I am mindful of the committee's time, but I should mention that there is a dimension that we have not talked about today, which is about paying some carers in the workplace. We have just done quite a big study, and the results are quite revealing. We will share that with you, but I can give you some headlines at an appropriate point, if there is time.

The Deputy Convener: I will come to that, but I want to pick up on a couple of things from the discussion so far—if I forget to come back to that issue, just shout out.

There is a tension around who is responsible for what needs to be done. Mia Preston asked whether there is a role for professional organisations such as the FSB to provide either the training itself or the collation of resources that are available. Is there also thinking about what could be done by others who are involved in a workplace, such as trade unions, because they support employees to pick up the pieces when things go wrong?

How can MSPs facilitate those kinds of conversations? It might be possible to take action through legislation, but it might not be, because we recognise the burden that that puts on smaller businesses in particular. What else can we do to support those conversations and that facilitation?

David Cameron: I would like the trade unions to do a lot more, especially with regard to having more positive conversations about changing cultures. I am not saying that this is always the case, but quite a lot of what we have observed involves employers simply being told what they are legally required to do. However, we need to move beyond legal requirements and have the conversations that ensure that there is a change in culture. When you frame the discussion in terms of legal requirements, you are starting off from a negative position, and we want people to act in a more positive way.

The Deputy Convener: Of course, there might be cultural or historical reasons why they start off from that position, but I take your point.

Mia Preston: We have mechanisms already. We have conferences and exhibitions that businesses are part of. Why do we not have a presence there? Why are we not doing conferences? Why are we not turning up at business exhibitions and saying, “Okay, this is why this is valuable to you as a business”?

I think that we need to look at existing infrastructure and see where we can use it and where we can get the trade unions in, rather than trying to recreate things. Let us build on what we have already got.

Chirsty McFadyen: Another thing that already exists—going back to no one left behind and the wider employability landscape—is local employability partnerships. When those work in the way that they are intended to, they are really powerful and they are a great way for multiple different types of organisations to work together to improve things for neurodivergent people. Using LEPs as a forum for these conversations and, again, broadening that out to employer ability and employer-focused interventions could be really powerful as well.

Jill McAlpine: Chirsty, I sit on the Highland version of that partnership and it works great in practice.

When you are asking the question about work, you cannot ignore the question around the NHS and provision. In the Highlands—and I am sure that it is similar everywhere else—the answer to the waiting list was just to remove from the waiting list everybody who was not in actual crisis. We cannot think that that does not have a huge impact on people’s ability to get out and work. If we are going to wait for people to get to crisis point before we even intervene, we are failing. We are failing them; we are failing businesses.

In my introduction, I said that I am a perimenopausal woman, because that is important in this context. I am an employer, I am an unpaid carer for my chronically ill husband, and I am a business owner. When I reached perimenopause, my brain stopped working. We know scientifically that there is a really close link between dopamine and oestrogen. We know that to be true—it is not disputed—and yet, even though I got a private diagnosis, I was taken off the list in NHS Highland, along with everyone else. That was how it dealt with the situation, even though we had waited a year and a half. By the way, I am in a privileged position. I pay for my own cognitive behavioural therapy and everything else. I despair at the thought of what it is like for anyone else.

In reality, although I have a private diagnosis using the exact frameworks that the NHS uses, I cannot get care through the NHS. I also said to my doctor, “Right, I’ll pay for it privately,” which again is a danger to me, because how do I know that they are giving me the right medication? However, as you know, there is no shared care arrangement, so my doctor said, “Well, we wouldn’t be able to deal with your other medication if you did that.”

I am sitting here speaking from a privileged position, but also as somebody who is trying really hard to be economically active as an employer and somebody who is responsible for my household income, and the one time that I had to call on the NHS, there was nothing available. I cannot even think what it is like for those people who are trying to navigate the world of work in that position.

When we talk about how we support employers and employees in the workplace, we first have to fix the fundamental issues with our mental health services. I know that it is not easy because I know that, in the Highlands, that is competing with people who have got depression or other mental health issues, people who are suicidal and all of that, but that is where we need to do the fix. Thank you for allowing me to take the discussion off track—I just think that that is an important point.

The Deputy Convener: I do not think that you have taken it off track at all. I think that part of what has led us to some of the issues that we face is siloing and compartmentalisation and not seeing the holistic picture. That certainly came through very strongly in our first session this morning, when we were focused on education.

Now might be the time, Alan, for you to speak about parents and carers, and looking at that whole picture for people.

Alan Thornburrow: That is just it. We are whole humans, are we not? We are more than just employees or employers.

Last year, we supported about 2,200 children, young people, and their families. We often find that the patterns that parents see in their young person lead to questions about whether they are also neurodivergent, which then has ramifications for them in the workplace. The basis of our research is whether having a neurodivergent young person at home, along with possible additional caring responsibilities, leads to any downward pressure on the individual or family unit. Does it limit someone’s ability to be economically active? Overwhelmingly, the answer is yes.

12:00

The study concluded at the end of last year. We are just writing it up, and it will be published at the end of the first quarter, but it shows that 96 per cent of respondents reported negative health and wellbeing impacts and 74 per cent changed working patterns due to caring for a neurodivergent young person.

It is also important to state that 87 per cent of respondents were women. Often, when a school asks someone whether they would like to come and collect their child, it is not really a question but a directive and it is overwhelmingly mothers who do that. It is inevitably mothers who reduce hours and are perhaps not able to work full time or at all.

There are some fairly big findings there. Of course, it does not take a genius to figure out that there is downward pressure on people's living standards. We talked about the benefit of creating a better culture, but we are also talking about creating a more economically active population. The more that barriers to understanding neurodiversity in the workplace are removed, the more we find that, without exception, the wider that permeates. It is not just about whether we could have better conversations or improve recruitment; it extends into asking about the body of carers that we have, whether they can fulfil their full potential and, if not, what we can do about it as employers.

We will distribute the report on that study to the committee when it is available, and we will also disseminate it much more widely. It is very revealing, which is not a surprise, because we have heard it anecdotally, but it is good to have an evidence base.

Mia Preston: I want to pick up on Alan's point because I have lived experience of that. As a foster carer, I had to give up my day job because the school was phoning me to come and pick up the young person. They did not want to exclude them, so it was an unofficial, under-the-table request—"Can you come and pick them up? We think they need time out." I was getting so many phone calls that I had to give up my day work. It is definitely happening out there.

The Deputy Convener: That is a failure to recognise the whole person, the whole family and the whole community that we live in.

I would like to pick up on a few other points from what we have already heard. I apologise that I cannot remember who it was, but somebody talked about reverse mentoring—it might have been David Cameron. That is a nice example of doing things a little bit differently. Do you have other examples, either as employers or from working with employers, of the support that is available for employees but also for employers, colleagues and the workforce in general to better understand why that person thinks the way they think?

David Cameron: It is just about educating employers how to do consultations, which sounds like a really official, formal process, but actually it is done quite informally and reverse mentoring is part of that. It is about establishing pathways for people to communicate and share information, learning and what is working. Today, we started off talking about constant feedback loops from people who are going through processes and experiences, how that is working for them and how we make it work more effectively, and understanding the person-to-person thing that we have been talking about. I would certainly say that mechanisms that help people to consult without it being formal would help.

Mia Preston: I earn my living from doing this. I mentor potential employees by telling them to find the person who is gold standard and best practice within the company and talk to them, try to build a relationship with them, and see whether they can get that reverse support and unofficial mentoring. It would be really useful if we had more practices like that, where people with experience can take people under their wing and help them to advocate for themselves. I know that companies such as Microsoft, EY and SAP are doing that and finding really good results from it.

The Deputy Convener: I would like to connect those threads with what we heard about education in our first round-table session this morning. I know that not all of you heard that, so I mention that there was a comment that teenage young people are struggling in school or not attending because schools have not made—or cannot or will not make—reasonable adjustments, or because something changes for a young person and they cannot cope. If the types of qualifications and the assessments and requirements for exams that we have in schools are not beneficial for people with different forms of neurodivergence, what role can employers play in making our curriculum do better?

Fergus, I am looking at you and hoping that you will comment on that. It seems that we have a solid body of evidence and clear examples of why the curriculum for excellence does not quite get it—it could have got it, but it does not quite get it. What do we need to do differently so that the information that comes with young people as they leave school helps them? How can we assess them in a more rounded way? I do not know whether that question makes sense, but it has been going around in my brain for a bit.

Fergus McMillan: The careers information advice and guidance service that Skills Development Scotland delivers is traditionally associated with schools, but increasingly it is delivered in community venues, in partnership with local employability partnerships and third sector organisations, in colleges and in other settings. That means that it has potential to engage with those who do not attend school. I think that we could do a lot more there by increasing that scope and also by thinking about other platforms that people might engage with, including digital platforms such as My World of Work.

I heard what the witnesses in your earlier round-table session said about traditional qualifications not suiting everyone. The opportunities for experiential career learning, work experience, foundation apprenticeships and broader achievement outside school are essential, and those can involve informal learning and volunteering. It is essential that we help young people through learner profiles and passports and, as we discussed earlier, support them to confidently identify their skills and communicate them to employers or in further education or training.

Employers are central to the effective delivery of foundation apprenticeships and experiential career learning. There are partnerships with many of the industry bodies that we have talked about, some of which are represented around the table today, to bring that to life and make it a reality.

Ultimately, it is about how we measure learning—I think that that came up earlier—and the fact that broader learning needs to be a core part of that.

Mia Preston: The biggest problem that we have is that our schools are trying to create workers for a 19th century, Victorian workforce—factory workers, basically. We need to look at that. We need a system that will create workers for the future, but we do not know what that future is going to look like. That is a problem, but we have some examples of schools doing that.

In America, the Alpha school in Texas provides each person with two hours of individualised artificial intelligence learning, and the rest of their time is spent in acquiring life skills and building up work experience. One of the classes rented an apartment, which it set up as an Airbnb. The group's project for the year was to run that Airbnb. That is just one example. There is also outdoor learning. We need to look at emerging technologies and see how those can be used.

When I first began to teach, I was involved in something called an enterprise week, which was run by the school. It was absolutely brilliant. Pupils were taken off timetable for a week and given a project. It was engineering based, which is my background. They had to produce something. Businesses came in and ran workshops. The bank manager did a workshop on profit and loss. There was somebody from human resources and somebody else from manufacturing.

The kids were mixed up into groups—they were not allowed to be with any friends—and they produced a company. It was an amazing experience. The great thing about it is that it was a development opportunity not only for the children but for the staff, and we learned a lot from it. That was a great way of working with industry, and the kids loved it. We all had fun.

The Deputy Convener: Thank you—that is a great example.

I will bring in David Cameron.

David Cameron: I do not have much to say—I did not signal that I wanted to speak. However, even though I do not have much expertise with regard to education, I will take 30 seconds to say that we need to improve transitions for young people—they need much stronger support with those. We need to offer much better planning that is focused on their gifts or talents and their aspirations, and on setting people up for success. We still have a lot to do on that.

Jill McAlpine: You just stole my line, David—I am only joking.

We need to design for the future of work, but we must remember that young people have great ideas. There is a roomful of them here. We need to listen to young people. What I can see from those who are coming into the workplace is that they are redesigning the way that we work. They are forcing our hand a little. I, for one, love it. That was more of an observation.

The Deputy Convener: That is helpful.

Marek Zemanik: I want to link what Fergus McMillan said with the recruitment process. We know that employers still tend to recruit based on qualifications. Obviously, that is problematic when we know that disabled individuals and neurodivergent individuals are less likely to have formal qualifications. Therefore, we would encourage employers to think about skills-based recruitment. That is one thing that could help young neurodivergent people to transition into employment.

Alan Thornburrow: I am stating the obvious here. This point been made regarding public health provision, but there is chronic underfunding and lack of support in schools as well, as I am sure that the committee will have heard. The biggest ask is for capacity to be built. No amount of resource and information will have the same impact as education meeting a young person where they are. That is the formative experience that they take with them into the workplace.

If a person has had negative reinforcement based on the deficit view that they should be able to do things in the same way as everybody else, that impacts them culturally and socially for a very long time. We see that repeatedly. Many of us do not like the word "disclosure", but, as people move into the workplace, we need to have better conversations with them. There are stigma and fear for good reason. That is the case because of negative past experience and the perception that it could all happen again—the person thinks that they could be judged.

I come back to the core point—which it probably falls outwith the realms of one committee to address—that chronic underfunding is a huge problem. However, we should provide support for people now and not wait for that to be contingent on assessments, because I do not think that that will ever be resolved.

The Deputy Convener: David Cameron mentioned the need for support with transitions. For me, that flagged up the comments that have been made this morning about the distinction in the support that is available, depending on whether someone has a diagnosis and whether they disclose it, and what that does to them as an individual and the people around them.

Mia Preston: We also need to build in agency for pupils. In schools, things are very teacher-centric. I was doing the maths last night and found that, in a 60-minute lesson, an individual will get 1.76 minutes of that time. If we take out settling-in time, the class time comes down to 50 minutes, which reduces the individual's share to 1.42 minutes. Then, if there are people who need more help, that share goes down to a minute. That shows that it is difficult to rely on the teacher to do everything that needs to be done.

Can we give our pupils more agency? If they have agency in that environment, they will have agency in their work, and they will be able to advocate for themselves. That will make them better employees and make us better employers.

The Deputy Convener: Thanks for that; it is an important point.

We have come to the end of our questions. If our witnesses have something that they want to make sure that we hear, that they want to reiterate or that they have not had the chance to say, now is their chance.

Chirsty McFadyen: I have raised this before in other parliamentary sessions, but the data on neurodivergent people's employment experiences and on people with learning disabilities continues to be really poor. The Scottish Government has decided not to continue to boost the annual population survey, which means that the data that is gathered will change. I would just like to highlight to the committee that it is really important that, whatever new data ends up being chosen, we try to make sure that neurodivergent experiences and the different conditions that fall under neurodivergence are included, particularly in employment data, so that we can track when interventions are being made and how successful they are. If policies are not backed up by evidence we will not know whether they are working.

The Deputy Convener: Thanks, Chirsty. That is an important point.

Fergus McMillan: I agree with Chirsty McFadyen. An important part of the journey that we have been on with apprenticeships, and modern apprenticeships in particular, has involved the ability to disaggregate data and to know where we are making improvement and where we need to focus.

Mia Preston: The biggest problem that I can see concerns the fact that we have medicalised neurodiversity. Everybody's brain is different, and that is normal. We are expected to have different architecture, and that comes from the way that we are brought up as much as what we are born with.

Another important point is that our brains are plastic. The fact that we are neurodivergent does not mean that we cannot grow and change.

I would love to see the approach to neurodiversity moving away from a medical model and towards a more general one that recognises that human beings are messy and fantastic and amazing, and that we should find room for all of that.

The Deputy Convener: Thanks, Mia. Jill, would you like to add anything?

Jill McAlpine: Rejection sensitivity dysphoria features a great deal in the experiences of neurodivergent people and has a huge impact in the workplace. It would be good if this committee or somebody in Parliament could do a bit more research around that and think about its specific impacts, because I think that we will see that impact a lot more in the future.

The Deputy Convener: Thanks. That is a useful suggestion.

Thank you all for your time in this wide-ranging and rich session; we appreciate it.

That concludes the committee's formal business in public. We will now move into private session to consider the remaining items on our agenda.

12:18

Meeting continued in private until 12:33.

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