

The rest of this Official Report will be published progressively as soon as the text is available.

Scottish Parliament

Wednesday 28 October 2026

[The Presiding Officer opened the meeting at 14:00]

Portfolio Question Time

Justice

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): Good afternoon, everyone. The first item of business is portfolio question time, and the first portfolio this afternoon is justice. To accommodate as many questions as possible, I ask for concise questions and answers. I should say, because this has been an issue in the recent past, that if members want to request a supplementary question, they should press the request-to-speak button during the relevant question and only during the relevant question.

Fund to Leave

1. Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the fund to leave initiative, following reports that funding has not been made available to families since June. (S7O-00385)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Neil Gray): The programme for government committed to making the £2 million fund to leave initiative permanent. I am pleased to say that the first grant payment to Scottish Women's Aid has been processed and that the fund will be available for applications shortly. I am also pleased that, earlier this month, we announced that we would go further than the programme for government commitment and doubled funding to £4 million to ensure that there is no cap on support. The increased investment will reach even more women and children, supporting them to leave an abusive relationship and to take the first steps towards a stable, secure and independent future that is free from abuse.

Meghan Gallacher: That is a welcome response, but the Cabinet Secretary for Justice knows that leaving is not the end of the danger that women face. Around 60 per cent of women who leave will face stalking or some form of harassment, and I hope that he appreciates that a fund is not enough. Will the Scottish Government consider introducing a GPS tracker pilot to prevent perpetrators from breaching bail conditions and reoffending?

Neil Gray: I appreciate Meghan Gallacher's question, and I fully understand what she is saying about leaving not being the end of the story. Sadly, I have met too many victims, so I understand that very clearly. That is why we are taking forward measures to ensure that we are using technology across the criminal justice system as best as possible. We need to do that in a measured way, so we are piloting GPS technology through Sheriff Principal Wade's jurisdiction next year. I hope that that will allow us to provide reassurance to women and girls on the ability to keep them safe.

Damages (Scotland) Bill

2. Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what its estimated timescale is for introducing the damages (Scotland) bill, as committed to in the programme for government 2026-31. (S7O-00386)

The Minister for Victims and Community Safety (Kirsten Oswald): The Scottish Government intends to introduce a bill before the end of this year that would give effect to the Scottish Law Commission's recommendations for reform. Significant social and legal changes have taken place since the general law of damages for personal injury was last considered, including a number of new statutes and important court decisions. The bill will make changes to the law so that it is fit for the 21st century, seeking greater fairness in the context of awards of damages for personal injury. One of the reforms that we will introduce applies to the law of limitation in relation to certain asbestos-related conditions, which I know Marie McNair is interested in. Once the bill is introduced, I will be happy to meet her to discuss it.

Marie McNair: I am glad to have secured the bill's place in the programme for government and that it features early in this parliamentary session. Through my long-standing work for Clydebank Asbestos Group, I know the difference that the reforms could make to asbestos victims and their families. Many people who develop asbestos-related illness decades after exposure face additional distress because of the current time bar, and the uncertainty can mean financial hardship and added anxiety at a time when families are trying to focus on spending precious time together. Will the minister set out what support will be made available to assist asbestos victims and their families to finally access compensation and the justice that they currently are being denied?

The rest of this Official Report will be published progressively as soon as the text is available.

Kirsten Oswald: I am very grateful to Marie McNair and campaign groups such as Clydebank Asbestos Group for all their work in making clear the real-life consequences that the current law can have. That is why the Government is introducing legislation that aims to fix the problem and to make sure that those suffering from an asbestos-related health condition are not time barred in relevant situations. I am open to suggestions that Ms McNair or campaigners might have about what particular support is needed, and I am happy to consider those as the bill progresses through the Parliament. I give the assurance that the Scottish Government will do what it can to ensure that any legislation that is agreed to by the Parliament is implemented as soon as possible.

The Presiding Officer: Question 3 was not lodged. An explanation has been given.

E-bikes (Residential Areas)

4. Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to monitor the use of e-bikes in residential areas. (S7O-00388)

The Minister for Victims and Community Safety (Kirsten Oswald): On 16 October, the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and I met the head of roads policing to discuss operation armour, to hear at first hand how a targeted policing operation is addressing the illegal and antisocial use of e-bikes across Aberdeen.

Riding an electrically assisted pedal cycle without a licence, helmet and insurance is dangerous and is an offence. So far, this year, Police Scotland has seized more than 1,000 e-bikes and e-scooters, up from 569 last year. On 19 October, it began operation overlap, which is a week of targeted national enforcement. I thank Police Scotland for its ongoing efforts across the country to monitor and tackle those issues. I strongly encourage anyone who witnesses the misuse of e-bikes to contact Police Scotland so that appropriate action can be taken.

Daniel Johnson: I know that this is not the first time that the question has been asked and that that answer is not the first that has been given. Although much of the focus is on high-powered Sur-Ron electric motorcycles, the problem is also low level. The minister spoke about what to do if people see an offence being committed. Offences can be seen daily. Every time we see someone whose feet are not moving on an e-bike, that is no longer pedal assistance but an illegal e-bike. What action will the police take to stop that low-level abuse of the law? We have to get the basics right as well as tackling the complex issues of high-powered Sur-Rons.

Kirsten Oswald: I am grateful to the member for his focus on the area. It is important that we have a collective focus on it. It presents a real concern to communities across the country.

It was encouraging to see in Aberdeen the granular detail of Police Scotland's work to ensure that the focus is on communities and on the challenges that such misuse can present. That is a focus for Police Scotland. The operation that was undertaken last week is a good indicator of the direction of travel.

The Presiding Officer: There are supplementary questions.

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): Glasgow's Royal Hospital for Children has reported that e-scooters and e-bikes are now one of the

"most common causes of major trauma admissions"

in children. That was reiterated by Mark Lilley, the trauma co-ordinator at the children's hospital, who said:

"A fall at speed can cause life-changing head or brain injuries. We've seen the trauma these accidents bring to families, and we strongly urge parents to reconsider before buying".

Is it time for a high-profile public information campaign about the dangers for children?

Kirsten Oswald: That is a profoundly helpful and timely question from Pauline McNeill, as we are in the run-up to Christmas. It is important that parents know what is or is not permitted—what is legal or not. We need to protect our young people; however, parents have a responsibility, as do many others, in that regard. It is also important that detail from national health service partners and the police is part of that conversation. I agree with Pauline McNeill that it is important that a clear message is distributed, so that we all understand what is or is not legal.

Julie MacDougall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform): I agree with Pauline McNeill's suggestion. I have been contacted by a constituent in my region who was nearly a victim of a fatal crash, because of youths speeding around on e-scooters at the local retail park. Although e-scooters are banned on public roads and pathways, that does not deter those who want to cause a nuisance by going into private car parks and causing injury. What else can the Scottish Government do to ensure that private enforcement in retail car parks is

The rest of this Official Report will be published progressively as soon as the text is available.

strong enough to deter such dangerous and illegal behaviour—especially given that a police response can be quite slow?

Kirsten Oswald: I appreciate that question from Julie MacDougall. I encourage her to continue to engage with Police Scotland on the topic and on any similar concerns, as well as engaging with the operators of any particular private areas such as retail car parks. Fundamentally, it is not acceptable for people to engage in antisocial behaviour—which is what this is—which can have very serious consequences, as she outlined. That is a continued and on-going focus for the Government and Police Scotland.

Pauline Stafford (Bathgate) (SNP): I, too, welcome Police Scotland's recent week of action to target illegal e-bikes and scooters, and I hope that it continues to pursue that issue with the same level of focus.

My question is along the same lines as Pauline McNeill's question. Does the minister agree that, as we approach the festive season, there is a need to raise public awareness of the legal responsibilities and safety risks associated with the misuse of e-bikes, in particular for those who are considering purchasing one as a gift for a child or young person? Will the Scottish Government commit to a targeted national awareness campaign to help prevent misuse and improve public safety in the run-up to Christmas?

Kirsten Oswald: I am grateful for that question, and I re-emphasise what I said to Pauline McNeill. It is really important that parents—and all purchasers—understand what is and is not legal, and have some consideration regarding what they buy their children for Christmas. The points that have been made about the targeted marketing campaign are good ones; I am happy to go away and give the issue some further thought—and to do so with some speed given the time of year.

Organisations Supporting Victims and Survivors (Emergency Funding)

5. Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government whether it has provided the emergency funding for organisations supporting victims and survivors that it committed to in the programme for government 2026-31. (S7O-00389)

The Minister for Victims and Community Safety (Kirsten Oswald): The Scottish Government recognises the vital role that advocacy services play in supporting victims and survivors to engage with the justice system and access the support that they need.

Through the programme for government, we committed to provide emergency funding for organisations under significant pressure, including advocacy services. That funding has not yet been allocated, because officials are working at pace with providers across the sector to assess demand, workforce pressures and funding requirements and to understand where additional investment could have the greatest impact for victims and survivors. That dialogue will inform implementation of the commitment in a way that best meets the needs and the level of support that is required, and considers the longer-term implications. Ministers remain committed to delivering the programme for government commitment as quickly as possible.

Katy Clark: In my region, North Ayrshire Women's Aid and East Dunbartonshire Women's Aid and the STAR Centre, which provide rape crisis services in Ayrshire, have confirmed to me that—as the minister said—they have not received any of the emergency funding. I understand that the STAR Centre's waiting lists are currently between four and six months, and the waiting list for Glasgow and Clyde Rape Crisis Centre is over six months. Can the minister say a little more about when the promised emergency funding will be delivered to organisations to ensure that women and girls can access those vital services? It is absolutely apparent that the sector is in crisis.

Kirsten Oswald: I am grateful to Katy Clark for her focus on this area. That focus is important to members across the chamber and to the Government, which is why the programme for government recognised the significant and growing pressures facing organisations that are supporting victims and survivors; we have set out our commitment to respond to that.

We are working with providers to ensure that funding is distributed in a way that is fair and evidence based and which delivers maximum benefit to the people who rely on their services. Again, I reassure Katy Clark that officials are working at pace to gather the evidence in order that action can be taken as soon as possible.

David Green (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (LD): Highland Council will cut funding to Caithness and Sutherland Women's Aid by 40 per cent next year, despite there being no alternative specialist domestic abuse services in the region. The organisation has told me that a reduction of that scale will have a disproportionate and immediate impact on safety, access and prevention work.

While I certainly welcome the Government's commitment to tackling the epidemic of violence against women and girls, I fear that that national intent has not been reflected locally in that case. Will the minister

The rest of this Official Report will be published progressively as soon as the text is available.

therefore step in and consider using the delivering equally safe fund to address the gap that has been created by those cuts?

Kirsten Oswald: The delivering equally safe fund, as the member correctly points out, is an important element of our toolkit when we are looking at the best way to support those who are affected by the very damaging impact of violence against women and girls. However, I would hold back for now, given the importance of officials looking at the situation as it is on the ground and working at pace to gather evidence, and the need to make sure that we are best placed to use that evidence to guide decisions about funding for services that support those in need.

Iris Duane (Glasgow) (Green): I recognise the minister's commitment to emergency funding, but I hope that she agrees that we must go further. I recently raised with the Government the case of the Murray's Initiative women's service, which was forced to seek emergency external funding to stay open for just less than a year. While the organisation continues to fight for more funding, that situation is happening across the country, and it is reducing the safety of survivors of gender-based violence and their confidence in the idea that those services will continue to run.

What action will the Government take to ensure that the Murray's Initiative service and organisations providing similar services will not need emergency funding, but will instead receive consistent multiyear funding so that they continue to protect our communities?

Kirsten Oswald: I am grateful to Iris Duane for focusing on the importance of the services that are provided. I point out that, as part of our focused commitment on support to victims and survivors, the Scottish Government is investing £12 million through the victim-centred approach fund between 2025 and 2027 for specialist advocacy support for survivors of gender-based violence. I am sure that Iris Duane recognises that that is a significant commitment across Government, led by the First Minister, to ensure that violence against women and girls and support for victims and survivors is central to everything that we do. I assure her of our continued focus on that area.

If Iris Duane wants to write to me about the particular case that she mentions, I will be happy to look further into it.

Duns Road Policing Department (Closure)

6. Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether any consultation or risk assessment was carried out prior to the closure of the Duns road policing department. (S7O-00390)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Neil Gray): As Rachael Hamilton will be aware, decisions regarding the deployment of officers, the location of policing units and the allocation of operational resources are matters for Police Scotland and the chief constable. However, given the concerns that have been raised about the closure of Duns road policing unit, I sought further information from Police Scotland on the matter and have been provided with reassurances that support will continue to be provided from Dalkeith, where Duns officers have been redeployed.

I was advised that the move is intended to align road policing resources more strategically to manage areas of demand, based on fatal collisions and collisions resulting in serious injury, as well as other identified road-related harm. That shift forms part of a broader move away from a model in which road policing resources are primarily aligned to individual local divisions. Although close engagement with local policing will remain important, that approach enables road policing officers to operate more flexibly at national level and, as a result, communities in the Scottish Borders can draw on a wider pool of specialist officers, meaning that the service that is available is not limited to the number of officers who are based locally.

Rachael Hamilton: I appreciate the cabinet secretary's recent engagement on the road policing department. However, last night there was a fatal accident in Berwickshire.

The closure of Duns road policing unit has meant that 2,000 miles of road in the Borders are now unmanned. Residents believe that we have lawless, unsafe roads and that police officers are under huge pressure because they have to travel further.

Given that the Scottish Police Authority and Police Scotland have warned of an £80 million funding black hole and a potential loss of 1,260 officers, will the minister commit to providing the funding that is needed to protect policing in the Borders and keep communities safe?

Neil Gray: I am sorry to hear about the fatal collision that Rachael Hamilton has raised.

It is not true to say that roads in the Borders are left unpoliced. I refer back to the point that I raised in my first answer about the deployment of officers from Dalkeith and the fact that the specialist officers who are

The rest of this Official Report will be published progressively as soon as the text is available.

available mean that the response to issues in the Borders is not limited to the number of officers who are based there. However, I will take the point up with the Scottish Police Authority to ensure continued confidence in the area, as the responsibilities align.

The budget discussions are continuing. We await the outcome and the detail of the United Kingdom budget today, so that we can understand what resources will be available for us to deploy to organisations such as the Scottish Police Authority.

Duncan Dunlop (South Scotland) (LD): Since the introduction of Police Scotland, the number of officers in the Borders has gone down from around 40 full-time officers to 13. There were also three road policing hubs, but first we lost Hawick, then Galashiels and now Duns. On top of that, Hawick fire station is being reduced from a crew of 25 to seven full-time firefighters. There is a clear trend of centralisation, with each service retreating separately.

I understand the funding challenges, but has the Government considered how it could bring emergency services together to maintain critical local services in more rural areas across the south of Scotland?

Neil Gray: Mr Dunlop will understand that, given my background, I am very interested in ensuring that communities in rural and island areas receive strong service provision, not just from the police but from all public services. He will also be aware that Scottish Borders is supported by around 1,900 police officers from across the Lothian and the Scottish Borders division.

His point about service sharing between emergency services is being explored in many areas. If that is something that he feels would be appropriate for communities in his area, he should raise that with the emergency services that have operational responsibility for that deployment.

Operation Begonia

Kim Schmulian (Glasgow) (Reform): I am familiar with success stories of Police Scotland's operation begonia from organisations in Glasgow that work with prostitutes. Can the minister advise whether any consideration has been given by the Scottish Government to applying the practices of this policy to other vulnerable groups?

The Presiding Officer: Ms Schmulian, I do not think that you read out the question that was printed for number 7. I just wonder whether you can read out the actual question.

7. Kim Schmulian (Glasgow) (Reform): To ask the Scottish Government what consideration it has given to applying the approach and practices used in operation begonia to other vulnerable groups. (S7O-00391)

The Minister for Victims and Community Safety (Kirsten Oswald): Operation begonia, Police Scotland's national approach to tackling prostitution, has been in place since April 2025 following a pilot in Aberdeen. Police Scotland regularly reviews its implementation and impact, including identifying where further improvements are needed, such as strengthening pathways into support services for those involved in commercial sexual exploitation.

The Scottish Government continues to fund begonia patrols, training and partnership working across policing, justice and support services, including investment in improving understanding of, and responses to, the online dimensions of commercial sexual exploitation, ensuring that action keeps pace with changing patterns of exploitation.

In addition, we provide £287,760 through the delivering equally safe fund to projects that improve access to support for women with experience of commercial sexual exploitation. I would say to the member that, as operation begonia develops, we will continue to consider lessons from its implementation and how they can inform our wider approach to supporting vulnerable people and addressing exploitation.

Kim Schmulian: Can the minister advise whether any analysis of cost has been undertaken with regard to the diversion of women from the criminal justice system to wider social support mechanisms?

Kirsten Oswald: I am grateful for the member's focus on diversion and prevention, as it is profoundly important and central to the approach that the Government adopts in these spaces.

I would point out that operation begonia takes a victim-centred, trauma-informed approach, recognising that women involved in prostitution are victims of exploitation and signposting them to local support organisations while challenging and deterring men's demands.

Population Growth (Police Resources)

The rest of this Official Report will be published progressively as soon as the text is available.

8. Katherine Sangster (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of the impact of projected population growth on its decisions regarding the allocation of police resources. (S7O-00392)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Neil Gray): The allocation of police resources is the responsibility of the chief constable, who is operationally independent, with oversight from the Scottish Police Authority. In allocating resources, the chief constable will take account of demand, threat, risk and harm across the country and will allocate officers, staff and budgets to the areas where they will have the greatest impact on public safety.

Police Scotland's new evidence-led policing for our communities model, which is expected to be in place nationally by March next year, uses a rich mix of demand information and data, including population distribution, to help it determine what resources are required, as well as where and when they are required.

Katherine Sangster: Population growth across the Lothians is forecast to be higher than the national average over the next decade, but the area currently has nearly half the full-time-equivalent police officers per 10,000 people than the rest of Scotland has. How will the Government ensure that future spending on policing takes into account where the largest population growth will be and not just the where the largest population is now?

Neil Gray: I recognise the challenges that Katherine Sangster has raised. I have had similar discussions with Paul McLennan, and I understand the challenge that is facing East Lothian, as well as the rest of the Lothians, because of population increases. These are matters for the chief constable in allocating resources, but they are also areas of active discussion with the Scottish Police Authority and the chief constable to ensure that there is a fair spread of response availability and capability. I am happy to take the matter up at Katherine Sangster's request.

Colin Beattie (Midlothian North) (SNP): The Scottish National Party has invested record funding of more than £1.7 billion for policing in 2026-27. How will that investment, and the Government's future plans, ensure that Scotland's police service will always be visible and at the heart of our communities?

Neil Gray: The funding will allow Police Scotland to deliver its 2030 vision and its three-year business plan, including its aim to increase the capacity and capability of its local policing teams. Together, those will set a clear direction for a service that is equipped to meet new challenges while remaining visible, accessible and connected to the communities that it serves.

The public rightly expect to see policing in their communities, and the chief constable has made it clear that community policing remains fundamental to Police Scotland's approach. Local police officers play a crucial role not only in responding to crime but in preventing harm, building trust and maintaining confidence.

Child Criminal Exploitation

9. Angela Ross (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Reform): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to improve the identification and recording of child criminal exploitation. (S7O-00393)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Neil Gray): In December, ministers directed four inspectorates to undertake an independent national review of responses to group-based child sexual abuse and exploitation and child criminal exploitation.

We welcomed the review's recommendation to establish national arrangements for the collection, sharing and analysis of information relating to group-based child criminal exploitation. We are working to improve the identification of and response to child criminal exploitation, which includes taking actions under Scotland's trafficking and exploitation strategy delivery plan, updating the national risk framework and developing Scotland's approach to contextual safeguarding.

We are also working with the United Kingdom Government to implement the new child criminal exploitation offence and prevention orders in the Crime and Policing Act 2026, which will provide more tools for partners to protect children and prevent perpetrators from causing harm.

Angela Ross: As the cabinet secretary said, the Government commissioned a national review and it identified a lack of agreed definitions and consistent data collection as key barriers to tackling child criminal exploitation. How can ministers and the cabinet secretary be confident that vulnerable children are being identified and protected when Scotland still cannot say reliably how many children are affected and when data on that will be available?

Neil Gray: As I said, we welcome the findings of the review. Officials are considering the report's findings and recommendations with partners and are assessing how they can inform ongoing national and local improvement activity.

The rest of this Official Report will be published progressively as soon as the text is available.

A programme of work is under way with the national child sexual abuse and exploitation strategic group to improve data collection and analysis to strengthen our response to child criminal exploitation. As part of that, the Scottish Government's chief statistician is chairing a short-life working group, which is bringing together experts to consider a range of data sources that can be collated and analysed to build a more comprehensive picture of child criminal exploitation in Scotland.

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Con): For people to feel comfortable in assisting with the identification and recording of child criminal exploitation, we need to improve whistleblowing policies in our country. Will the cabinet secretary confirm whether whistleblowing will be included in phase 11 of the Scottish child abuse inquiry, and is he comfortable that all areas of child safeguarding failures will be addressed as part of that review?

Neil Gray: Meghan Gallacher will understand that the answers to those questions are not under my direct area of responsibility, but I will ensure that I give a response to her on those questions and give her the appropriate details.

Katie Hagmann (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): How is the Scottish Government working with the UK Government to tackle online harm, as the nature of threats to our children is changing dramatically in an increasingly digital world?

Neil Gray: I welcome that question from Katie Hagmann, because the threat of online harm to children is palpable. Police Scotland has recognised it as being one of the most significant areas of risk to children. Although online safety is reserved, we have consistent and robust engagement with UK ministers and Ofcom to strengthen online protections for children.

Siobhian Brown, the Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise, has asked the responsible UK ministers to meet to discuss online safety and areas of shared interest. She has also met Ofcom to discuss protections for children and young people online, and she participates in the interministerial group on child sexual abuse. Scottish Government officials meet regularly with colleagues in the Home Office and UK Government departments that are responsible for online safety policy, and those engagements provide opportunities for us to share Scottish evidence, expertise and stakeholder perspectives.

Community Policing and Response Times (Carnoustie and Monifieth)

10. Lloyd Melville (Angus South) (SNP): Presiding Officer, I apologise for being slightly late to this session.

To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to support Police Scotland in improving the visibility of community policing and response times to incidents in towns, including in Carnoustie and Monifieth. (S7O-00394)

The Presiding Officer: If I had known that you were late, I wouldnae have taken your question. You were lucky on this occasion.

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Neil Gray): Effective and visible deployment of policing remains at the heart of Police Scotland's approach to keeping people safe. The Scottish Government is investing record funding of more than £1.7 billion in policing this year, and the chief constable has confirmed that that will enable Police Scotland to maintain officer numbers at 16,500 while continuing to prioritise front-line services.

Operational deployment decisions, including officer allocation and response arrangements in towns such as Carnoustie and Monifieth, are matters for the chief constable. However, Police Scotland assesses all incidents using its THRIVE—threat, harm, risk, investigation, vulnerability, engagement—approach, considering factors such as those so that officers can be deployed where they are needed most and members of the public receive an appropriate and timely response.

Lloyd Melville: Constituents in Carnoustie and Monifieth have raised concerns with me about the visibility of community police, as well as response times, including in relation to repeated incidents of vandalism. I recognise the pressures that the cabinet secretary has outlined, but will he outline how the Scottish Government is seeking to strengthen Police Scotland and ensure that communities such as mine feel safe?

Neil Gray: I absolutely recognise the concerns that Mr Melville's constituents have raised. I reiterate my point about operational decisions being for the chief constable and about the investment of more than £1.7 billion that we are making in policing this year.

Police Scotland has confirmed that the funding that we have provided will allow it to maintain officer numbers at 16,500 nationally. Communities such as Carnoustie and Monifieth are also supported by around 893 officers across the Tayside division, alongside regional and national specialist officers, who can be deployed when required to help to ensure that local communities receive the policing service that they need.

The rest of this Official Report will be published progressively as soon as the text is available.

The chief constable's commitment to providing locally visible, community-based policing remains clear, and I hope that that reassures Mr Melville and his constituents.

Thomas Kerr (Glasgow) (Reform): Police visibility is extremely important, but the cabinet secretary will be aware of concerns from the Scottish Police Authority that, if it does not receive a funding increase, Scotland could see police numbers fall to their lowest level in 23 years. Does the cabinet secretary agree that we need more police, not fewer? What action will he take to ensure that that is recognised by the Government as it considers the budget and seeks to tackle the issues facing lawless Scotland?

Neil Gray: Those matters are under consideration as the budget process continues. I absolutely want to ensure that we can continue to maintain police officer numbers.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes portfolio questions on justice. I apologise to members who I was unable to take during that session.

Health and Care

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): The next portfolio is health and care. Again, members who wish to ask a supplementary question should press their request-to-speak button during the relevant question.

Respite Care (West Lothian)

1. Pauline Stafford (Bathgate) (SNP): I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests as a sitting councillor at West Lothian Council.

To ask the Scottish Government what engagement it has had with West Lothian health and social care partnership and NHS Lothian regarding the availability of respite care for children with complex medical needs in West Lothian. (S7O-00395)

The Minister for Community Care (Alison Thewliss): Scottish Government ministers have met NHS Lothian twice, since June 2026, about the review of respite care for children with complex medical needs. Officials have also held discussions with the Minister for Mental Wellbeing, Public Health, Sport, Alcohol and Drugs, who wrote to NHS Lothian on 8 July.

My expectation, and that of other ministers, is that respite care continues to be made available to meet the needs of children and their families. We have made that expectation clear in discussions with NHS Lothian, alongside the need for any proposed changes to be fully informed by meaningful engagement with the affected children and families. I welcome the board's commitment to maintain a level of service for families accessing provision until their child reaches their 18th birthday.

Further engagement with families is taking place before proposals are brought to the NHS Lothian board for consideration. Ministers have asked NHS Lothian to keep the Scottish Government informed throughout the process, and I will continue to monitor those developments closely.

Pauline Stafford: Sunndach house in West Lothian is a highly specialised respite facility for children with complex needs, which provides an essential residential respite care service for families in the Lothians, including some of my constituents. The minister has touched on the fact that the facility has been under review by NHS Lothian since 2024. Does she agree with me that any decisions must ensure that respite facilities that provide specialist medical care remain available not only to families who depend on those services now, but to those who may need them in the future, and that any final decision should be made only following meaningful consultation with the families that will be affected?

Alison Thewliss: I agree that respite services are a vital aspect of social care support for disabled children and their families. My expectation, and that of other ministers, is that respite facilities with specialist medical care will continue to be available to meet the needs of children and their families. We have made that expectation clear in discussions with NHS Lothian, alongside the need for any proposed changes to be fully informed by meaningful engagement with families and affected children. As I said, I have raised those concerns with NHS Lothian and will continue to carefully monitor the situation.

Jenny Young (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Lab): As Pauline Stafford has said, families have been stuck in limbo for years, not knowing whether this vital service will continue in their community. The minister has been engaging with NHS Lothian, which is very welcome, but does she appreciate the length of time that the process is taking and the uncertainty that has hung over families for years? Can she provide any insight into when families can expect the consultation to be completed and when the decision will finally be made?

Alison Thewliss: I appreciate the cross-party engagement on this important issue. There is not yet a date for the conclusion of the matter, because it has to go to the NHS Lothian board. We have asked for more

The rest of this Official Report will be published progressively as soon as the text is available.

time, so that it can be considered more carefully with the families; that will delay the conclusion, but we want the decision to reflect the needs of families in the area.

Miles Briggs (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Con): This morning, I wrote to the minister to request a cross-party meeting with the families. There is real concern that the health board has not understood unmet need. We need to get answers on that, because elected members have not been able to secure them. Will the minister agree to that meeting? Will she also ask the health board whether it will now publish all that information, so that we can look at what could be a business case to keep both respite services open?

Alison Thewliss: I am more than happy to agree to the cross-party meeting because that discussion would be really helpful. I have concerns about whether needs have been properly considered and whether there is a wider need outside the geographical area for people to access the service. In my time in politics, I have certainly never come across families who want less of a service, so I am very interested to explore that further.

Monklands Replacement Project

2. Joe Fagan (South Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the Monklands replacement project. (S7O-00396)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Care (Angela Constance): As Joe Fagan will know, I gave an update to the Parliament that made very clear our commitment to deliver a new Monklands hospital. The previous business case that NHS Lanarkshire submitted did not provide value for money, so it could not be approved in its current form.

Therefore, a structured reset programme is already well under way to develop a more affordable and sustainable proposal. My officials are working closely with NHS Lanarkshire to develop revised proposals as soon as possible. That work is being developed alongside ongoing engagement with staff, patients, local communities and elected representatives through the formal stakeholder arrangements that NHS Lanarkshire has established. I will be in a position to consider the board's recommendation and determine the next step once I receive a revised proposition.

Joe Fagan: The *Scottish Mail on Sunday* has reported that the new Monklands hospital will likely not open until 2031 and will be smaller and have fewer services than was originally planned.

NHS Lanarkshire needs a new hospital, and patients deserve clarity. Can the cabinet secretary tell us exactly why the costs escalated with the previous proposal to the extent that she felt compelled to cancel it when she did? Can she tell us which services and specialisms that are provided in the current hospital should be withdrawn from the new one?

Angela Constance: I have been very clear with the Parliament and the people of Lanarkshire that there will be a new Monklands hospital. The Scottish National Party was the only political party that made that commitment in its manifesto. The hospital will be on the Wester Moffat site; it will have a type 1 accident and emergency department, and will be an acute hospital and a district general hospital.

However, as I have said, if Mr Fagan follows the logic, I am still to receive a revised proposition. He should remember that there is no credible path to delivery if a plan is not affordable. We seek to deliver a credible plan for the good people of Lanarkshire.

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): From what I hear from constituents, the current main concern is not so much about whether there will be a new Monklands hospital but more about what services will be included in the new hospital, as Joe Fagan asked about. We all await further details. I was therefore pleased to hear the announcement that the east Airdrie link road has been given the green light, which is an important step in the delivery of the new hospital. Does the cabinet secretary agree that such a significant commitment perhaps demonstrates the Scottish Government's desired scale for the project?

Angela Constance: I certainly hope so, and I welcome the progress that has been made on the east Airdrie link road, which is an important enabling piece of infrastructure for the new hospital at Wester Moffat. As I have said, the Scottish Government remains absolutely committed to the Monklands replacement project and has confirmed its support for continued development of the road project and a significant financial contribution towards its delivery.

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Reform): The cabinet secretary rejected the proposal for the new Monklands hospital, as it was coming in at £2.1 billion, which she said did not represent value for money. However, in a briefing to MSPs, the health board confirmed that the cabinet secretary has not said what she would regard as value for money. We could end up with a new proposal for a smaller Monklands hospital that, with inflation, comes back at a figure that the cabinet secretary again rejects. Why will she not tell the health board what budget it should be working to?

The rest of this Official Report will be published progressively as soon as the text is available.

Angela Constance: That is a fair question, but there is a process that I currently have to undergo with the health board. Importantly, the health board accepts that there needs to be a reset to deliver a programme that is affordable, and it is undertaking all that work. It is important that the board is given time and space, limited though that is, because I want a proposition to come back to me by the middle of next year. The board is narrowing its options for consideration, so I want to allow it a bit of space to do further work. However, I reassure the member that, in the not-too-distant future, we will have to get clarity on the financial envelope. It is not in the interests of the people of Lanarkshire for me to pre-empt the work that the health board now must do, but I accept that we need to get an envelope that we all sign up to and agree to.

Covid-19 and Flu Winter Vaccination Programme

3. **Bob Doris (Glasgow Kelvin and Maryhill) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the Covid-19 and flu winter vaccination programme. (S7O-00397)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Care (Angela Constance): The flu programme launched in early September, and Covid vaccination started on 5 October. Uptake is progressing well. As of 18 October, more than 678,000 flu vaccinations had been administered, which is ahead of the figure at the same point last winter. More than 39 per cent of care home residents and 25 per cent of those aged 65 and over have received their flu vaccine. In the first two weeks of the Covid programme, more than 89,000 vaccinations have been administered, with more than 36,000 care home residents receiving their vaccine. I encourage everyone who is eligible to come forward when invited.

Bob Doris: I thank the cabinet secretary for that encouraging answer and I encourage everyone who qualifies for a vaccine to get one as quickly as possible. However, I have been contacted by a constituent who previously met the eligibility criteria for the flu and Covid vaccination programmes but for whom that changed in 2025. That followed recommendations from the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation, which restricted access to the Covid vaccination at that time. My constituent is deeply concerned that they have been missing out since then.

Although I absolutely acknowledge the role of the independent JCVI, does the cabinet secretary appreciate the concerns of those who now miss out on the Covid vaccination? Will the Scottish Government consider making that vaccination freely available on request for those who previously qualified but who now miss out?

Angela Constance: I would be happy to receive further information from Mr Doris about his constituent's concern. However, I confirm that the eligibility criteria for the Covid programme have not changed and are identical to the eligibility criteria for the winter 2025 programme. As Mr Doris acknowledged, eligibility is based on the recommendations and advice of the JCVI. Eligibility has reduced over time as the threat of the virus has, thankfully, decreased due to increases in population immunity, which resulted from a combination of vaccinations and naturally acquired immunity after infection. The programme is therefore targeted at the groups who remain at risk of severe illness, hospitalisation or death—that is, residents in care homes for older adults, everyone aged 75 and over, and everyone aged six months and above who is immunosuppressed.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): Public Health Scotland's June 2026 report on immunisation and vaccine-preventable diseases highlighted significant inequality in vaccination uptake between those who live in the most and least deprived areas. Given that uptake for the Covid and flu vaccination programmes is a long-standing issue in Scotland, what measures will the Scottish Government take this winter to ensure that people with the dual challenges of potential illness and deprivation are accessing vaccinations?

Angela Constance: Ms Baillie makes a legitimate point, and it is one that needs to be addressed and wrestled with each year. Various courses of action have been undertaken. As she knows, the situation is monitored, and weekly figures are published by Public Health Scotland. There have been communication campaigns, such as the "For some, flu hits harder" campaign and the "Help beat flu with a simple wee scoosh" campaign, which is targeted at children. We continue to work closely with Public Health Scotland and health boards to find better ways to communicate with particular communities, whether those are communities that are more impacted by poverty, or groups for whom there are other barriers, such as language. I am happy to continue to engage with Ms Baillie on that point.

Care Placements (Support for Social Work Services)

4. **Holly Bruce (Glasgow Southside) (Green):** I refer to my entry in the register of members' interests, which states that I am a sitting councillor on Glasgow City Council.

To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to ensure the availability of safe and suitable alternative placements for children requiring care, and what support it provides to social work services experiencing acute capacity shortages. (S7O-00398)

The rest of this Official Report will be published progressively as soon as the text is available.

The Minister for Community Care (Alison Thewliss): In August, the Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise convened a multi-agency round table, jointly with Councillor Tony Buchanan from the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, to identify practical actions that can be taken to ensure safe and suitable placements for children who require care. The National Social Work Agency is co-ordinating our ongoing action, and all partners are committed to delivering meaningful and sustained improvements. Through that collaborative work, partners have agreed to take a range of measures to address immediate pressures in the system alongside longer-term actions that are aimed at increasing capacity. That activity includes reviewing assistance for foster and kinship carers and addressing barriers to new children's care services, and it sits alongside broader action that is under way to support a sustainable, responsive and trauma-informed social work workforce.

Holly Bruce: Social work in Scotland is at a crisis point. Earlier this year, all 32 of our chief social work officers raised the alarm about the shortage of suitable homes and carers for children, which is putting children at serious risk of abuse and needless hardship. Children as young as three were being housed in accommodation with young adults, and social workers felt forced to take children into their own homes. The minister identified some concrete measures that will be taken to improve capacity, but what measures will be taken in Glasgow to ensure that every child who needs a safe and suitable home is given one and that no social worker is forced to take a child into their personal care?

Alison Thewliss: I pay tribute to social workers for the work that they do in incredibly difficult circumstances. We recognise those pressures and we are working alongside Social Work Scotland, COSLA and local authorities to consider the issue in more detail. As a former Glasgow councillor, I know that a lot of work has been done over the years to tackle, for example, the issue of children being put in expensive out-of-area placements. Good work has gone on there, but I would be more than happy to meet Holly Bruce to discuss in more detail those pressures in Glasgow.

Public Health (East Kilbride)

5. Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to improve public health in East Kilbride, including through its proposed reform of health and social care services. (S7O-00399)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Care (Angela Constance): The Scottish Government is committed to improving public health across Scotland, including in East Kilbride, through reforms that will make health and care services simpler to access, more consistent and better connected to people's needs. We want people to experience a more joined-up system in which services work together and care is co-ordinated around every person's needs.

The reform process will support the delivery of more care closer to home through community services, digital care and local support, while helping people to stay healthier and independent for longer through a greater focus on prevention and early intervention.

Collette Stevenson: It is important that timely, high-quality hospital care is delivered alongside strong preventative services. I welcome the proposed lung and heart health MOTs and the Scottish Government's investment in tackling waiting times, including in Lanarkshire, where waiting times for many specialties are falling. It is vital that we ensure that health and social care is easy to access. How will the MyCare.scot service be enhanced? What benefits will that bring for patients? When will the proposed general practitioner walk-in clinic in East Kilbride open?

Angela Constance: The walk-in service in East Kilbride is part of the second wave of the pilot programme, as part of which services will open from April 2027. I will set out further details as plans develop.

MyCare.scot, which continues to develop incrementally, will be a key enabler of Scotland's wider programme of digital health and care reform. As functionality is introduced, people will be able to receive care-related communications, to view and manage appointments, to manage prescriptions and to access an expanding range of health and care information through a secure platform. The digital front door programme is prioritising the roll-out of secondary care digital communications and appointment functionality across Scotland, before being expanded into wider health and care services.

Care-at-home and Community-based Services

6. Colin Beattie (Midlothian North) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to expand care-at-home and community-based services in order to prevent avoidable hospital admissions. (S7O-00400)

The Minister for Community Care (Alison Thewliss): While the Scottish Government sets the overall policy framework for health and social care in Scotland, responsibility for assessing local need, ensuring that

The rest of this Official Report will be published progressively as soon as the text is available.

appropriate social work support is available and commissioning the services that are required to support people in their homes or communities rests with local authorities and health and social care partnerships.

Our programme for government places a strong emphasis on shifting support closer to communities and homes to enable people to live independently with the right support around them. That is why we have provided a record settlement for local government of almost £22.5 billion to health and social care in 2026-27. The provision of that real-terms uplift will enable the delivery of more sustainable and resilient services.

Colin Beattie: Does the minister agree that increasing the capacity of hospital at home in my constituency of Midlothian North is key not only to helping people to remain independent for longer, but to reducing avoidable pressure on hospital services across NHS Lothian?

Alison Thewliss: I very much agree with Mr Beattie's point. Hospital at home is a real success story in NHS Lothian, with 2,216 patients having benefited from the service between May and July this year. By providing hospital-level care at home, the service is delivering timely access to care while reducing avoidable hospital admissions. The service, which is operating across all territorial health boards, is central to our ambition to deliver care closer to home.

Cara McKee (West Scotland) (Green): Care at home and other community-based services are hugely important, and they would not be possible without the brilliant social care workforce that we have in Scotland. However, care workers are often undervalued and underappreciated, and current pay levels reflect that. What will the Scottish Government do to ensure that members of the social care workforce receive fair pay and conditions for their work, in recognition of unions' call for a minimum wage of £15 per hour?

Alison Thewliss: I certainly value and appreciate the care workforce and the incredible job that those workers do. A lot of work is being done to look at how wages and terms and conditions are negotiated by employers, providers, staff in care settings and the trade unions, and there will be more to come on that.

Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I have always understood that the primary aim is to treat people in a hospital-at-home setting as much as possible. Most people agree that they want that. However, in large parts of rural Scotland, and particularly the Highlands and Islands, that is unachievable because we just cannot get the staff to deliver it. That means that outcomes for people are getting worse and worse, and hospitals such as Raigmore have significant delayed discharges. Should we not face the reality that in some parts of Scotland we need bricks-and-mortar, set-down settings in communities, such as community hospitals?

Alison Thewliss: I agree that we need both. I would argue that it is not an either/or. Hospital at home is available in all the territorial health board areas. It provides a service for people who do not really need to be in a hospital setting and who can have their conditions managed at home by NHS staff. It is a very important programme for keeping people at home in their own settings.

Chronic Pain Services

7. David Green (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (LD): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to improve access to chronic pain services. (S7O-00401)

The Minister for Mental Wellbeing, Public Health, Sport, Alcohol and Drugs (Maree Todd): We are investing a record £22.5 billion in health and social care in 2026-27, including £100 million through the national health service operational improvement plan and a further £90 million package that is targeted at reducing the longest waits for care for conditions such as chronic pain.

We have worked collaboratively with people with lived experience, clinicians, service leads and the third sector to improve access to chronic pain services through our pain management service delivery framework. We have worked with Public Health Scotland to improve the collection of waiting times data for chronic pain to provide a clearer understanding of the different pathways that are offered to patients who are referred to pain services. We also continue to support the development of new educational resources on chronic pain for clinicians.

David Green: Kirstin Laing and her husband are both long-term patients at the pain management centre in Golspie, and her husband relies on infusions to enable him to walk. Kirstin fears that NHS Highland's plans to review services, coupled with its current policy of not offering injections to new chronic pain patients, could leave many people across the Highlands living with preventable pain. The Scottish Health Technologies Group recommends that all health boards provide specialist injections as part of their chronic pain services. Does the minister agree?

Maree Todd: I certainly do. Let me be absolutely clear: I expect all NHS boards to provide a service that enables people with chronic pain to access appropriate support for their condition. I have received firm

The rest of this Official Report will be published progressively as soon as the text is available.

assurances that NHS Highland continues to provide a specialist chronic pain service for patients across the whole NHS Highland area and that the service is delivered by a multidisciplinary team of consultants, specialist nurses, psychologists and physiotherapists. The service remains open to new referrals, with patients being assessed to identify the appropriate pathway and the most appropriate intervention for them, based on clinical assessment.

I would be more than happy for the member to write to me with the details that he has provided today and to pick those up with NHS Highland to ensure that, exactly as I stated, all NHS boards are providing a service that enables people with chronic pain to access appropriate support.

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): People across Scotland who are living with long-term conditions must be properly supported to live pain free and to have access to the care that they need as close to home as possible. What work is the Scottish Government doing with organisations that represent people with long-term conditions to deliver a new long-term conditions framework, as set out in the programme for government?

Maree Todd: We will publish the long-term conditions strategy for adults in March 2027, with a first refresh being planned after three years. The strategy will set out our future approach to improving care and support for long-term conditions, recognising the impact of multimorbidity and the fact that an increasing number of people in Scotland are living with one or more long-term conditions. We are engaging closely with organisations that represent people living with long-term conditions, as well as people with lived experience and clinicians, as we develop the strategy.

PANS and PANDAS

8. Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to support people with paediatric acute-onset neuropsychiatric syndrome and paediatric autoimmune neuropsychiatric disorders associated with streptococcal infections, commonly referred to as PANS and PANDAS. (S7O-00402)

The Minister for Mental Wellbeing, Public Health, Sport, Alcohol and Drugs (Maree Todd): I recognise how distressing acute-onset neuropsychiatric symptoms can be for children, young people and their families. At present, there is no formal clinical guidance in the United Kingdom specifically for PANS or PANDAS. Children and young people presenting with those symptoms are cared for through existing national health service services, with clinicians working across relevant specialties to provide multidisciplinary assessment and treatment based on clinical need.

I am aware that the UK-wide PANS PANDAS steering group is leading work to publish clinical guidance and improve pathways for care and treatment. The group has representation from relevant clinical professional bodies and third sector partners.

We will continue to monitor emerging clinical guidance and research evidence. Where that supports a need for new service models, NHS Scotland will review arrangements as appropriate to ensure that patients receive the best possible care and support.

Fulton MacGregor: Given the concerns that the minister has outlined about the recognition, diagnosis and management of PANS and PANDAS and the need to improve awareness and support across NHS Scotland, education and social care, will she agree to meet representatives of PANS+ Scotland, which has recently become a registered charity, to discuss how clinical guidance can be disseminated and implemented and how support for affected individuals and their families can be improved?

Maree Todd: Let me be clear: I recognise the concerns that have been raised about PANS and PANDAS and the impact that the conditions have on affected children and their families. The UK PANS PANDAS steering group is developing guidelines that have the potential to provide greater clarity on best practice for assessment, diagnosis and management. As that work is still under way, it would be premature to reach conclusions about the dissemination and implementation before the recommendations are available.

I absolutely welcome the work of PANS+ Scotland and its recent establishment as a registered charity. Once the guidance is published, I would encourage representatives of the charity to engage with Scottish Government officials to discuss its implications for Scotland and how awareness and support might be strengthened across the relevant services. I would be more than happy for the member to write to me about the issue after the guidance has been published.

ADHD or Autism Assessments (Reform of NHS Boards)

9. Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): To ask the Scottish Government what steps it will take to ensure that people waiting for an attention deficit hyperactivity disorder or autism assessment are not adversely impacted by its planned integration of national health service boards. (S7O-00403)

The rest of this Official Report will be published progressively as soon as the text is available.

The Minister for Mental Wellbeing, Public Health, Sport, Alcohol and Drugs (Maree Todd): I recognise that the proposed changes may cause concern to those who are waiting for neurodevelopmental support, including diagnostic assessment. However, public service reform is fundamentally about improving services and simplifying how we deliver care. It will enable us to provide more consistency to those who are seeking neurodevelopmental support as we reduce 14 different approaches to one joined-up system that will be delivered through two strategic boards.

We are in the design phase of our reform work, which will be developed in partnership with staff, staff representatives, trade unions, stakeholders and the public. Alongside that work, we are continuing to improve neurodevelopmental support. That includes adopting the Royal College of Psychiatrists national neurodevelopmental pathway for adults, supporting the implementation of the children and young people's neurodevelopmental specification, and providing additional funding to ensure that support is available where people need it most.

Mark Ruskell: Children who are seeking support rely on the education pathway, which is meant to lead to NHS intervention if appropriate. However, that is not happening in reality and the pathway is incredibly disjointed. How will the Scottish Government ensure that every step of the pathway is resourced and integrated between health and education to ensure that children who need assessments will get them?

Maree Todd: The member is absolutely correct that, within schools, neurodevelopmental support is delivered through additional support for learning and is underpinned by the principle that support should be provided based on identified need, rather than on a formal diagnosis.

Our work on our national staged intervention model and additional support needs data improvement will support greater consistency in the identification and recording of children and young people's needs and the response to them. That will ensure that the needs of neurodivergent learners are met consistently, regardless of where a child or young person lives in Scotland. In the shorter term, we are providing an additional £29 million of ASN funding to local authorities to support the ASN workforce in 2026-27.

Drug-related Deaths (East Ayrshire)

10. Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of the upward trend in drug-related death statistics for East Ayrshire. (S7O-00404)

The Minister for Mental Wellbeing, Public Health, Sport, Alcohol and Drugs (Maree Todd): Any drug-related death is a tragedy and my heartfelt condolences go out to those who have lost loved ones.

We are concerned by National Records of Scotland figures that show an 11 per cent increase in drug-related deaths across Scotland between 2024 and 2025, with East Ayrshire recording the largest percentage increase of any local authority. Those figures are an important indicator of where further attention might be needed, although year-on-year changes can be particularly pronounced in areas with smaller numbers of deaths and they do not necessarily reflect an established trend. It is really important for local partners to monitor trends in their areas, to understand what is driving them and to ensure that services respond to local need. We remain in close contact with partners in East Ayrshire, who have strengthened outreach, expanded harm reduction activity and improved access to treatment and support.

Alan Brown: As the minister said, each death is a tragedy, and East Ayrshire has had the biggest increase of all local authority areas, with 27 additional deaths between 2024 and 2025. The stark reality is that the figure is higher than the figures for Glasgow and Edinburgh combined, and it more than doubles the number of families in my area who are dealing with the death of a loved one for this reason.

What additional analysis has been undertaken to understand the underlying causes of the increase? Will additional resource be made available, particularly for rehabilitation and post-recovery support services? That issue was identified in the Scottish Human Rights Commission report "Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in the South of Scotland".

Maree Todd: Let me be clear that nobody can look at the figures without concern. East Ayrshire saw a significant rise in drug-related deaths in 2025, and we owe it to those affected to understand what is behind the increase. We are working with Public Health Scotland and local partners to assess the factors involved, such as synthetic opioids. Many people who are affected by problematic drug use today have been living with addiction for a long time and they often face a range of health, housing and social challenges alongside their substance use. Those factors can increase vulnerability and the risk of harm, but evidence-based treatments such as methadone and buprenorphine play an important role in reducing risk and keeping people engaged with support.

In East Ayrshire, local partners have strengthened their support through assertive outreach, proactively engaging people who are at the greatest risk, alongside wider harm reduction and treatment services. We will

The rest of this Official Report will be published progressively as soon as the text is available.

continue to work with local partners and Public Health Scotland to understand the increase and ensure that support is targeted where it is most needed.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes portfolio questions. We are seven minutes over time, and the reason for that is that a few questions were quite long and a lot of the answers were very long. I apologise to members who could not ask a question, but that is why.

Learning Disabilities, Autism and Neurodivergence Bill

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): The next item of business is a Scottish Liberal Democrats debate on motion S7M-01739, in the name of Adam Harley, on a learning disabilities, autism and neurodivergence bill. I will allow a couple of minutes for ministers to change places, but, in the meantime, members who wish to speak should press their request-to-speak buttons now.

15:08

Adam Harley (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (LD): I am pleased to open the debate on behalf of the Scottish Liberal Democrats, and I would like to kick off by reflecting on a recent parliamentary round-table meeting, organised by Joe Long MSP, following the Government's decision to abandon the LDAN bill that had been proposed in the previous parliamentary session.

At a time when political differences can seem impossible to overcome, it was striking that every party in the Parliament was represented at that meeting and spoke with one voice. There was agreement that Scotland must do better for those with learning disabilities, autism and neurodivergence, and there was real disappointment at the Government's decision to scrap the promised bill. There was also determination not to let the voices of those who engaged in good faith go unheard and not to allow the ambition behind the bill to disappear.

The same desire for action is felt by our constituents right across Scotland. To see that, all we need to do is open our inboxes and read the stories of people being let down by a system that too often fails them or is simply nowhere to be seen.

On average, people with learning disabilities in Scotland die 20 years earlier than the wider population, and too many people continue to experience profound inequalities in healthcare, education, employment, social care and the justice system. That is why so many people had placed their hope in the proposed legislation, ever since the Government committed to it in 2021.

Over the next five years, the Government asked people to engage, which they did. There were almost 900 responses to the public consultation. Many people shared deeply personal and painful experiences to help to build a better future for others. They were told that their voices mattered and that legislation was coming. They trusted the process, but, after five years, the Government walked away from a bill that it once described as a "world-leading opportunity". Where has that ambition disappeared to?

The Government argues that progress is needed now through policy rather than legislation. I understand the desire to make progress now, but I reject the idea that we must choose between policy and legislation. There is nothing preventing the Government from improving services while, at the same time, developing legislation to provide long-term accountability—those two things should go hand in hand. Indeed, being able to do two things at once is the bare minimum that we should expect from any Government.

The Government has used the recent rise in demand for services as an excuse to drop the bill.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): Adam Harley makes an excellent point, but there is a more fundamental one. The Government seems to be saying that it would take time to legislate, but surely the work has been done—the bill is prepared and ready to go, and it would simply take parliamentary time. Does he agree that to say that there is a need for time seems slightly absurd, given that the time has already been spent?

Adam Harley: I entirely agree with Daniel Johnson and thank him for his intervention. I struggle to understand the Government's excuses for dropping the bill. They do not make much sense to me, as I will come on to now.

The rise in demand for services is surely one of the strongest arguments in favour of taking the issue seriously and introducing legislation. As I have said, I do not understand the Government's reasoning and I do not buy its excuses—neither does the community nor, I believe, do most members of the Parliament.

The rest of this Official Report will be published progressively as soon as the text is available.

Indeed, one of the strongest arguments for legislation came from the Minister for Mental Wellbeing, Public Health, Sport, Alcohol and Drugs herself. In 2024, Maree Todd told the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee:

“legislation is needed. We need some statutory underpinning to some of the work that we have done. We have done it on a voluntary basis up until now, and we need to give it some teeth in order to effect change.”—[*Official Report, Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee*, 3 December 2024; c 5.]

I agree with the minister. We have had strategies, action plans, consultations and promises, but we have not had enough accountability when promises were not delivered. The entire point of introducing the bill in the first place was to have legislation that takes a holistic approach, because people do not live in silos; they interact with public services every day. That is why the mandatory training, improved advocacy, better data collection and proposals that were set to be included in the bill are so important. Instead, we are left without any strategic direction at precisely the moment that it is needed most.

As we have heard, much of the hard work has been done. The evidence has been gathered, the consultation has happened and the need is very much there. I am sure that, over the course of the debate, we will hear just how acute the need is.

Today's debate is not about whether we start this journey but whether we finish it. Let us improve services now, but let us also provide the oversight and accountability that legislation can bring. I hope that you do not mind me saying this, Presiding Officer, but it would be no bad thing if a majority of members of the Parliament, having listened closely to the people calling for change, were to flex the muscles of the Parliament just a little bit and send a clear message to the Government that it cannot have things all its own way, that it must honour the commitments that it made before the election and that, if the Government will not listen to the voices of this community and act on what it is telling us, the Parliament will.

I move,

That the Parliament calls on the Scottish Government to introduce a Learning Disabilities, Autism and Neurodivergence (LDAN) Bill to the Parliament.

15:14

The Minister for Mental Wellbeing, Public Health, Sport, Alcohol and Drugs (Maree Todd): I welcome the opportunity to take part in today's debate. As I set out to members when I made a statement on the learning disabilities, autism and neurodivergence bill on 7 October, it is imperative that all of us be open and transparent to the communities that I know are very invested in the bill.

I must admit that I have not had the opportunity outside the chamber to discuss with the Liberal Democrats the issues that they have raised today, but it is welcome that they are showing such an interest in the issue, given that they have not engaged with it in the past.

Daniel Johnson: [*Made a request to intervene.*]

Maree Todd: I would like to make some progress, please.

I believe that colleagues in each of the Green, Labour and Tory parties have raised the legislation with the Government. However, I reiterate to the Liberal Democrats that my door is always open to discussing these important issues.

It is clear that members across parties share a common goal. How we achieve that goal is where we differ. That is the position from which I start today, and that is why our amendment to the motion identifies where there are gaps. That is why I have met numerous people with lived experience of learning disabilities, autism and neurodivergence, as well as the organisations that support them, since taking up my post as minister. Aaron and Jack from the lived experience advisory panel are in the chamber, and I am very grateful to be able to give them my personal thanks for their input. I communicated to them the difficult decision that the Government took not to progress the bill at this time. Indeed, I note Adam Harley's comments that it was the Scottish National Party that previously introduced proposals for a bill and that, in my previous role as minister, I worked to develop those proposals. That is absolutely true, which is why the decision not to proceed with legislation is a difficult one.

Most importantly, the decision has been about recognising where we can or cannot make positive changes. It is unfair to people who have put their trust in us to be anything other than transparent, open and honest. That is the Government's position.

Daniel Johnson: Will the minister give way?

The rest of this Official Report will be published progressively as soon as the text is available.

Maree Todd: I would like to make more progress. There are things that I wish to put on record in the interest of honesty, transparency and openness. I will certainly give way to the member towards the end of my speech.

I point to the last line of our amendment, which makes it clear that an LDAN bill should continue to be an option during this parliamentary session. We have already committed to the Parliament that legislation remains an option. However, crucially, I must listen to what the evidence shows. What is clear is that urgent action is needed now, through policy reform, service improvement and targeted investment.

Regrettably, the Liberal Democrat motion does not set out an honest evaluation of the legislation, so let us be honest about what draft LDAN legislation cannot do alone. It would not change diagnostic pathways. That is an issue of which all members are aware, and Miles Briggs has raised it with me. Legislation would not automatically provide people with access to the right support in the right parts of the system.

Andrew Baxter (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (LD): Will the minister give way?

Maree Todd: Give me one moment.

It would not build the capacity in the system to ensure that we have enough staff and resources to assess and support people. Legislation would not help us to build capacity in the third sector to offer more appropriate or local community-level support to people. Joe Long will know that well from his time working at Scottish Autism. It would not invest in the services that people need on the ground in their local communities. Those are issues that were raised with me in the chamber by my SNP colleagues. Legislation would not automatically bring down long waits for assessment. Instead, it could set arbitrary targets without changing how people engage with those services or how those services are structured, accessed and resourced. Kayleigh Kinross-O'Neill has taken an interest in that.

Fundamentally, a bill is not a panacea. There is a moral imperative on all members to be clear and honest to people about what legislation can and cannot do.

Andrew Baxter: Will the minister give way?

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh North Western) (LD): Will the minister give way?

Maree Todd: Not at the moment.

Elsewhere, legislation alone has not produced the results that stakeholders hoped for. In 2022, English legislation was intended to improve support for people with Down's syndrome. It has been criticised because, to quote from a recent *Times* article, "nothing has changed". The National Down Syndrome Policy Group wrote to the Prime Minister on 3 August challenging why, four years after coming into force, the Down Syndrome Act 2022 had not yet been implemented. Of course, legislation takes a number of years to progress and implement—we must be honest about that.

Adam Harley: If the minister had listened to my speech, she would have heard me make the point that we do not only want to carry forward legislation—we want to see the Government taking action now, and it can do both things at the same time. Does she agree with that?

Maree Todd: I also heard the member say that he thinks that there is an LDAN bill sitting on the shelf, ready to be introduced to Parliament. That is absolutely incorrect. The member will be aware that the desire for an LDAN bill was built around the kernel of the wish for a commissioner who would uphold, and ensure the upholding of, people's rights, and that door was closed to us last year by Parliament.

We are absolutely open that we do not have all the solutions. We continue to remain open to the possibility that legislation might be right in the future, if the evidence shows that we require additional statutory measures to achieve the outcomes that people expect and deserve, but that robust evidence does not currently exist.

People want action from the Government now. I note that the Labour amendment alludes to that and suggests that legislation and change should happen in tandem. However, taking that approach would not allow for us to see whether the changes that are currently being made are actually improving people's lives.

Joe Long (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): Will the minister take an intervention?

Maree Todd: For example, Labour's amendment does not allow for the £7.6 million investment that was made in September to bed in, nor does it allow us to assess how the changes being brought out by the adoption of the Royal College of Psychiatrists' new four-tier pathway are working. It is asking systems to focus efforts in multiple directions at a time when I believe that we need to be laser focused on delivering support to an increasing number of people.

I will take Mr Long's intervention.

The rest of this Official Report will be published progressively as soon as the text is available.

Joe Long: I appreciate the minister taking my intervention. She says that there is not adequate system-wide data to tell us whether or not we need a bill, but one of the provisions sought in the bill was better, robust system-wide data. That is why we wanted a body that would look at the whole system and the whole life journey. That is what the legislation sought to do.

Maree Todd: I will certainly come on to the issue of data. I agree that there is a dearth of data—we do not have adequate data to support us in our work in this area, and that is why we are making improvements in that regard.

Turning to the Government's amendment, I have consistently said that a decision not to proceed with the bill reflects our judgment that the most effective route to improving people's lives is the way forward that we have set out, and that is not a retreat from our commitment to improving outcomes. As is clear from wider experiences elsewhere, legislation is not an end in itself. In some parts of the UK, it has not demonstrably improved people's lives.

People and families are looking for practical help now—I hear that loud and clear. Delivery must remain our focus. I restate that we are not simply ticking off old bill proposals and finding an identical non-statutory alternative. We are taking an entirely new approach that is about being joined up on neurodevelopmental support. People are waiting far too long for the support that they need. As Joe Long referred to in my exchanges with him on 7 October, tackling that first must be key. People should not need to wait years for legislation in order for that support to be provided.

We fulfilled our first 100 days commitment to engage stakeholders. That has shaped the development of a draft route map for adult neurodevelopmental support, which I will publish very soon. It will include how we empower our workforce beyond psychiatrists to support how people get the assessments that they seek. The route map sets out a four-level approach based on recommendations from the Royal College of Psychiatrists, comprising public health and universal, targeted and intensive support based on individual need.

Our aim is for people to access support as soon as their needs are identified while still ensuring that diagnostic assessments are available where that is clinically appropriate or required. In parallel, we are continuing to work to take forward actions that were identified through the review of the implementation of the national neurodevelopmental specification for children and young people. That is backed by £7.6 million this year—a more than doubling of investment in this area. New funding of more than £600,000 will also deliver improved support for autistic adults, including support while waiting for assessment.

In education, an additional £29 million of ASN funding for the workforce is providing teachers with tangible solutions to help them now, such as digital initiatives and the autism toolbox. With Dyslexia Scotland, we doubled the number of places for teachers on the professional recognition programme in dyslexia and inclusive practice. This morning, the Cabinet Secretary for Education, Culture and Gaelic visited a primary school in Ayr to see at first hand how the new national staged interpretation model for ASN will work in practice to support children. In its first six months, our learning disability fund supported more than 2,800 people with learning disabilities, more than 330 families and 605 professionals. Last year, the annual learning disability health checks that we mandated resulted in more than 3,200 onward referrals.

On training, there has been widespread uptake of the essentials of our learning disability learning programme. We fund the University of Glasgow's Scottish Learning Disability Observatory to undertake research and to improve and digitise data.

We will introduce a landmark human rights bill that will incorporate further international rights into our domestic legal framework. Everyone in Scotland—neurodivergent people and people with learning disabilities included—stands to benefit from that bill's incorporation of economic, social and cultural rights. It will promote greater consistency, accountability and transparency.

Despite those changes, I recognise that some stakeholders, including those involved in the consultation and engagement, will remain disappointed by the decision not to proceed with legislation at this time. I say to those people that I am listening. My conversations with them have been very important, and they will continue to happen. I know that we need to rebuild people's confidence and trust if we are to ensure that their voices and views continue to shape reform.

Let us agree that all members want to see barriers removed. Our focus is on delivering practical changes now that will not come about with years of refining, passing and enacting legislation. A bill will continue to remain an option, but it will not improve people's lives today. That is the crux of today's debate.

I look forward to listening to colleagues, and I hope that those members who have engaged with the Government in recent days will listen with an open mind to the commitments that I have made today.

I move amendment S7M-01739.2, to leave out from "introduce" and insert:

The rest of this Official Report will be published progressively as soon as the text is available.

“significantly improve the support available for people who are neurodivergent, people who have a learning disability and people who are autistic; agrees that support across the country is too varied and inconsistent and recognises that there must be a direct focus on reducing waiting lists for neurodivergence assessments, recognising diagnostic pathways, improving accountability, more transparent capture and collation of data and ensuring better support is offered through Scotland’s education system; acknowledges a number of recent measures introduced by the Scottish Government, including £7.6 million for neurodevelopmental support for children and adoption of the Royal College of Psychiatrists’ 4-level pathway for neurodevelopmental support for adults, which will ensure differential diagnosis and prescribing capabilities for psychiatric support and referrals for autism, ADHD and other neurodevelopmental conditions; notes the importance of ensuring that the views shared by people with lived experience are key to driving Scotland’s approach and recognises the impact of the Bill consultation period on the LDAN community, as well as the need to rebuild confidence and trust with people to ensure that their voices and views continue to shape reform; affirms that third sector and community groups supporting people and their families must be properly resourced; agrees that changes that can happen much faster now for people through policy reform, service improvement and targeted investment must be pursued, but recognises that the opportunity for introducing a Learning Disabilities, Autism and Neurodivergence (LDAN) Bill to the Parliament should continue to be an option in the current Parliamentary session if improvements are not comprehensively made.”

15:27

Joe Long (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I refer members to my entry in the register of members’ interests, which states that I am a former director of Scottish Autism, and I thank Adam Harley for bringing this important and timely debate to Parliament.

I need not remind anyone in the chamber that we live in an era when trust in politics and politicians is at an all-time low. To regain that trust, we must deliver for the communities we serve. When a Government reaches out to people who have been marginalised and socially excluded for decades, then promises change, and asks for their time, knowledge and stories to inform that change, it is to be celebrated when those communities engage in good faith and in the hope that, this time, things could be different.

People with learning disabilities, autistic people and other neurodivergent people contributed a great deal to the development of a bill that most knew would not be a panacea for every injustice, but which could catalyse change and provide a strategic focus on their rights and needs. We should not be surprised if we find that those communities no longer trust politicians to deliver for them if that promise is broken.

Since raising the issue of the abandoned bill in the chamber over the past few weeks, I have received numerous messages from people whom the bill was meant to serve, expressing a profound sense of betrayal. The erosion of trust in politics concerns all of us in this chamber, so we must take collective responsibility for sending a message to those communities. To them, we must say: we are listening; we see you; and you matter. For that reason, we in Scottish Labour do not feel that the long-promised bill should be dropped so easily, and we will be coming together with other parties to send that message loudly and clearly today in supporting the Liberal Democrat motion. This is not about political point scoring; it is about all of us saying to marginalised communities that they should be able to trust policy makers to deliver on their promises.

By the end of the 10-year Scottish strategy for autism and a decade-long learning disability strategy, life outcomes for those communities had not materially improved. Piecemeal, sporadic initiatives were not enough; indeed, it was evident that wide-ranging, systemic change was needed if the rights and needs of those communities were to be fully realised.

It was that systemic change that advocates for the bill sought to achieve in 2021. Campaigners sought accountability from public services that were failing to deliver; more accurate, system-wide data on life outcomes and challenges faced by those communities; access to independent advocacy for those who were being let down; greater knowledge and understanding across public services, so that professionals could better accommodate their needs; and a joined-up approach to social inclusion, identifying barriers across policy and service silos and throughout the life course. We simply did not see enough of those initiatives—initiatives that were identified in the Scottish Government’s own consultation on the bill—in this month’s ministerial statement.

Let us be clear: most campaigners for a bill recognised all along that legislation should not be necessary, given that existing laws already make clear the rights of people to receive support. The truth is that those rights were not being, and had never been, fully met. That is exactly why the Scottish Government’s own recognition of the need to put strategic change on a statutory footing in 2021 was welcome. Now, however, the Scottish Government tells us that the bill is not necessary to bring about change; that it will take too long; and that the Government can act now.

That raises the following question: why has the Government not acted before? We have known for years that demand for assessment, diagnosis and support was rising, that pupils with high support needs had been

The rest of this Official Report will be published progressively as soon as the text is available.

struggling in mainstream schools, and that too many people with learning disabilities had poorer health outcomes than their peers. For five years, we were told, “Don’t worry—the bill will deal with that when it arrives.” Now we have had a 180-degree turn, and we are being told that it is not a bill but action that is needed and that the Government will come up with a plan very soon. All the while, more people join the long queue for assessment and support; more young people miss out on their education, because schools are not equipped to meet their needs; and more adults end up requiring acute clinical care, because support in the community is not available.

I recognise the opportunity of public service reform, national health service reform and social care reform to provide a system that delivers more consistently across Scotland, but, all too often, we have seen that, when big policy change happens, those who are less visible and less vocal, and who are struggling quietly just to get through the day, are overlooked. That is why I think that we need to maintain a specific cross-sectoral focus on the needs of neurodivergent people and people with learning disabilities.

I have been asked more than once why those groups require a special focus. The answer is clear: neurodivergent young people are especially likely to be absent from school, because they find the sensory and social environment overwhelming; autistic adults and those with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder are especially likely to be unemployed, because of a failure of employers to make reasonable adjustments; and people with learning disabilities are especially likely to die younger than their peers. These are profound and persistent inequalities that demand a sustained response.

Let us confront another uncomfortable reality: people with learning disabilities and autistic people already receive special treatment in the law. Both can be legally detained under mental health legislation in Scotland without having been given a mental health diagnosis. Given that neurodevelopmental differences are not, in themselves, illnesses, that amounts to their being detained for who they are. The legislation that we are discussing could offer a safety net to ensure that such legal discrimination need no longer exist.

I think that we are being offered a false choice. This is not an either/or situation; action and legislation need not be mutually exclusive. The urgent improvement of services can, and must, be undertaken while strategic, system-wide accountability and change are put on a sustainable statutory footing. I note that in recent weeks the Scottish Government has moved from saying that legislation would not be necessary at all to keeping that option on the table. That raises another question: what level of evidence would be required to decide that this was needed? What would we need to know that we do not know now? I think that we have more than enough evidence of unequal life outcomes and opportunities and of suppression of human rights to know that serious systemic change is already necessary and requires the focus that legislation would bring.

The minister should be assured that members across the chamber want to engage collaboratively on improving support right now. We will absolutely do so, because we all need those communities to feel that those of us who represent them in this Parliament are on their side. However, the promise of future action cannot be a substitute for commitments already made. For trust to be restored, the Government must honour the work that has been done, keep its promises and deliver the bill.

I move amendment S7M-01739.1, to insert at end:

“; notes the time and expertise contributed by people with lived experience, support professionals and stakeholders to the development of the proposed Bill over several years, and agrees that urgent action to meet the needs of these communities can be delivered alongside legislation that puts sustainable, systemic change on a statutory footing.”

15:34

Helen McDade (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform): I thank Adam Harley and the Scottish Liberal Democrats for bringing the debate to the chamber. I also thank the Donaldson Trust, Scottish Autism and the many organisations and individuals who have contacted members ahead of today’s debate.

I speak in the chamber in my role as Reform’s health spokesperson, and I am convener of the Health, Care and Sport Committee, so I am aware that people are desperate for this bill and of how much interest there is in seeing forward movement on it.

On 1 September, the minister informed us all that the bill would not proceed, so I will start with the simplest question: why have a bill at all? The minister has been clear about why she thinks that we should not have one. She thinks that change can come faster through policy reform, service improvement and targeted investment, and she said that legislation would take several years. I understand that argument.

The draft proposals that were published in March were not perfect—few drafts are—but that is not a reason for ditching them; it is a reason for improving them, as other members have said. A bill gives something that a policy paper cannot: accountability. It provides a benchmark—a line in statute that says what people are entitled to expect and against which ministers, health boards and councils can be measured. Without a bill,

The rest of this Official Report will be published progressively as soon as the text is available.

we are left with good intentions, and Scotland has never been short of those. The road to hell is paved with them.

The commitment to the bill was made in 2021—five years ago. Since then, there have been a consultation, panels, analysis, delay and draft proposals this year. Then, in September, after an election, the bill was dropped. Meanwhile, the Scottish strategy for autism and the keys to life framework came to an end in 2021, and so far nothing has replaced them. For five years, there has been no national strategy and no bill.

I have heard many commitments made in the Parliament to address specific health issues that have simply run into the sand. We do not want that to happen on this issue. The people affected—the ones we are talking about today—have also had that happen before. Other members have mentioned a lack of trust in the Parliament. The people affected can be forgiven for fearing that that is what is going to happen again.

The minister certainly analysed a long list of what is needed. She told us that the Government will still do those things, but it has had a long time to do them—indeed, she has been involved in that. It seems that something was required, and it was identified that a bill was the answer. We welcome a renewed commitment, but how will we know that the changes have happened?

The Government's amendment is revealing. It concedes that support across the country is

“too varied and inconsistent”

and that a bill should remain an option if

“improvements are not comprehensively made”.

When will the Government make that assessment, and when will it make a decision: will it be in one year or three years?

The minister's amendment states that

“changes can happen much faster ... through policy reform”.

What is the policy reform that the same Government could not have done? What is the difference? That is why having a bill matters.

I turn to the people at the heart of this. The bill was built on lived experience—that of people with learning disabilities, neurodivergent people, autistic people and their families, who gave their time and expertise. Other members have identified how difficult that was. Consultation and engagement are only worth something if they lead to decisions and actions. When that does not happen, those who are consulted are left very upset—often angry—and dispirited, and it can affect their mental health. That is not a small thing in a debate about people's wellbeing.

I understand from Scottish Autism that the lived experience advisory panel that helped to shape the bill has been wound up, so I ask the minister: what body now carries those voices into the room where decisions are made?

People are reasonable. They understand that not everything brought to the table can be adopted. So long as there appears to be good faith about taking an issue forward, they will accept that. However, if that good faith does not appear to be there, folk get very angry or, indeed, totally disillusioned. The Donaldson Trust has told us:

“Neurodivergent people have been left feeling hurt, angry and disillusioned.”

The Government's job now is to show good faith, but that is shown by deeds and not statements.

Reform's amendment recognises that immediate measures can be taken in the meantime, and that introducing legislation is not a barrier to acting in the short term. The minister has framed it as being about a choice between quick action and a slow bill, but it is not a choice. We can both take action and propose a bill, and we should do so.

What might the immediate measures be? The minister's letter credited the report on ADHD and autism pathways, which was published in January by the committee's predecessor, with informing the Government's thinking. I am glad to hear that. The report recommended mandatory neurodevelopmental training for all patient-facing health and social care staff; quarterly national reporting of referrals and waiting times; a road map with clear timelines; and putting third sector funding on a sustainable long-term footing, which is a critical measure. None of that needs a bill; work on it could start now. Will the Government commit to saying when that will happen?

On 7 October 2026, the minister told us that mandatory training could progress through NHS employment contracts. That is a start, but NHS contracts do not extend to teachers, council staff, police officers or court

The rest of this Official Report will be published progressively as soon as the text is available.

staff. As has been identified, those individuals deal with autistic people and people with learning disabilities every day. Where does mandatory training sit for them?

On pathways, the minister promised that an adult neurodevelopmental route map would be published in the autumn, based on the Royal College of Psychiatrists in Scotland's four-level approach. It is now the end of October. When will the route map be published?

The model relies on a community tier delivered largely by the third sector, which is too often funded locally and on a year-to-year basis. If the Government means what it says in its amendment that those groups "must be properly resourced", there should be multiyear funding that is appropriate to the task. The committee has heard from everyone that that is essential.

On data, I make the point to the minister that, on 7 October, her statement gave no estimate of how many people need help. The Government has announced £7.6 million for children's neurodevelopmental support and other sums besides. However, without knowing the scale of need, how can anyone, including the Government, judge whether that is enough? We need to understand far better the needs of people with the most severe autism and their families, who are too often the least heard of all.

The Government talks a good game, but plans are only good if they are put into practice. Those who gave years of their lives in difficult conditions to help get the bill into place deserve more than another plan. They deserve action now, and they deserve a benchmark against which that action can be measured. That is what a bill can provide, alongside the actions to which the minister has committed.

I move amendment S7M-01739.3, to insert at end:

“; recognises that immediate measures can be taken in the meantime, to improve the lives of people with learning disabilities, autism and neurodiversity, and believes that the process of introducing new legislation is not a barrier to taking action in the short term.”

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): I call Kayleigh Kinross-O'Neill to speak for five minutes.

15:42

Kayleigh Kinross-O'Neill (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green): Thank you, Presiding Officer. I probably will not take all that time.

I thank Adam Harley for securing the debate. I know that communication on the LDAN bill has been raised time and again by constituents, and the issue has appeared in many members' inboxes. Some people took part in the original consultation and some did not; both groups are confused and upset. When we put work into updating communities, it is important to understand that everyone has different needs and different understandings of the process. What works for one person might not work for another. In fact, communication that works for one person might be the absolute worst option for someone else.

The Greens believe that legislation is important in bringing a whole-system approach to confronting the inequalities and injustices that people continue to experience. Structures should be adaptable and, as has been mentioned, accountability is crucial in protecting and supporting people in education, healthcare settings, workplaces and general social life.

I would like to talk briefly about employment. I used to work for Scotland's national disabled people's organisation, where I set up internships for disabled and autistic people in the third and public sectors. As much as that job involved supporting disabled people to become confident in work, ask for what they need and advocate for themselves, it was also crucial to help employers to hire and support disabled employees.

The gut reaction is that we have the Equality Act 2010, that we do not discriminate against disabled people, that we have additional support needs training and that various other measures are in the works, but we know in practice that that does not always go far enough. Even employers who are 100 per cent dedicated to reducing barriers in the workplace can benefit from a bit of support when it comes to those really awkward conversations about disability and ill health at work, such as discussing reasonable adjustments to accommodate medication side effects, later start times, earlier finishing times, fatigue, remote working, buddy working and targeted mentoring. Those are not special needs; they are simply needs.

As a society, there is a lot to do to help disabled people, autistic people and neurodiverse people. Equally, we need to empower employers across sectors to support those people properly. That is why mandatory training was a key ask in the LDAN bill.

Inclusion Scotland has a lot of toolkits and there are a lot of third sector resources in this space. Crucially, as well as the consultation responses, it is all about lived experience.

The rest of this Official Report will be published progressively as soon as the text is available.

We agree that data gathering is very important in order to see how improvements to support services will be measured, what outcomes the Scottish Government expects to achieve, as Helen McDade said, and in what circumstances ministers might consider further statutory measures.

A bill would not immediately reduce waiting times, tackle shared care problems or change attitudes, but it would provide an opportunity to establish clear and consistent guidance and embed people's rights in decision making. As Joe Long mentioned, autistic people can still be sectioned under the Mental Health (Care and Treatment) (Scotland) Act 2003 and held for up to 28 days. They are still subject to compulsory treatment orders. Autism is still considered a mental disorder. That is in legislation.

Ultimately, as many have said, we do not want this to be an either/or, which is why our group has reached the point that we have. We all want LDAN on the table, and we know that the SNP amendment does not take it off, but this debate shows that communities have waited long enough. We want to send a stronger message to people with learning disabilities, autism and neurodivergence that we are listening.

15:45

Miles Briggs (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Con): I thank Adam Harley and the Liberal Democrats for lodging the motion and for using their party business time to raise this issue.

Since SNP ministers announced that they would not introduce the promised learning disabilities, autism and neurodivergence bill in this parliamentary session, anger and upset have rightly been felt by so many people across our country who put so much faith in the bill. We all want to see the negative outcomes that are experienced by so many people in our society turned around. Today, I genuinely hope that we take the opportunity to demand a reset to the approach that ministers have taken. This is a minority SNP Government—it does not have a majority in this Parliament—so Opposition parties and, perhaps most importantly, SNP back benchers can come together this evening to instruct the Government to think again and take the vital opportunity to put in place the legislative framework that will ensure that change happens.

In the previous parliamentary session, I sat on the Education, Children and Young People Committee and very much welcomed and praised the work on the draft bill that was being progressed by ministers. Although it was not perfect and many of us disagreed with parts of what would have been included in such a bill, it could and would significantly improve outcomes, which is what we all want to see. Pam Duncan-Glancy's Disabled Children and Young People (Transitions to Adulthood) (Scotland) Bill, which was introduced in the previous parliamentary session, provided similar opportunities that I would like to see taken up in a future bill.

Why is it important that ministers pause and change course? I agree that legislation is not always the only opportunity to deliver change, but Scotland is falling behind other nations in the United Kingdom—particularly England, where the Autism Act 2009 protects autistic people's rights. Since as far back as 2009, the UK Government has been required to create and maintain an adult autism strategy that obliges local authorities and NHS bodies to follow statutory guidance and to meet the needs of autistic people in England. For many years, NHS England has published and disaggregated data on autism assessments, referrals and waiting times. Since 2022, there has also been a legal duty for health and social staff in England to receive training on autism and learning disabilities.

Ahead of today's debate, I received an email from a constituent that outlines why people are demanding change. It states:

"Most Scottish councils do not understand the needs of neurodivergent people, and without mandatory training, decision makers cause us harm. What would make a real difference to neurodivergent people in Scotland is mandatory training, accountability and enforceable rights. Given the promises made over all these years, the reasons given for withdrawing the Bill are simply not credible. The Scottish Government consulted with us for years and then dropped the Bill, and those of us it would have covered, and our families, feel let down and betrayed."

The minister says that she is listening to people with lived experience. The Parliament and the Government have been doing that for almost a decade, and the bill was meant to be the end piece of that work. I hope that, if the Parliament instructs ministers this evening to introduce the bill, they will urgently look to re-establish the role of the lived experience group and start engaging on how a new cross-party bill can make such a significant difference.

The useful briefings that many organisations provided ahead of the debate look towards the need for a national plan in Scotland to remedy many of the systemic injustices that neurodivergent people and their families experience daily. The programme for government and the minister's October statement did not meet that request, and nor did they convey a desire to revive the transformative proposals that were drafted and developed for the bill and which are now abandoned. The Government has not considered the scale of challenges that so many people in our communities face.

The rest of this Official Report will be published progressively as soon as the text is available.

Sometimes, the Government gets things wrong. I believe that SNP ministers' decision not to proceed with the bill is wrong, but we now have an opportunity to remedy that. At decision time this evening, Parliament can unite to send a clear message that we do not accept that people with learning disabilities, autism or neurodivergence simply have to accept that the current situation is as good as it gets. At decision time this evening, Scottish Conservatives will vote to support the introduction of a learning disabilities, autism and neurodivergence bill.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): We move to the open debate. I remind members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons.

15:51

Heather Anderson (Dundee City West) (SNP): I declare that I am a serving councillor on Dundee City Council.

Twenty-six years ago, I answered the phone and was asked whether I was happy with the phrase "other than a special school"

being inserted into section 15 of what became the Standards in Scotland's Schools etc Act 2000. I agreed because, following years of campaigning, that phrase opened the door for any child with learning difficulties or a physical impairment to be included in mainstream education, rather than their automatically being placed in a so-called special school. The phrase

"other than a special school"

enshrined in Scots law the presumption of inclusion. We laughed about the civil servants being reluctant to use the word "mainstream", but we took the win.

When I answered the phone back then, I was one of the founding directors of the Scottish Human Services Trust, which had been formed in 1994 to work for greater social inclusion in Scotland. Our focus was on closing the long-stay institutions that, at that time, incarcerated around 4,000 people. We wanted disabled adults and children to be supported in their homes, and we introduced person-centred planning in Scotland to enable individualised support plans to be produced. Our key ambition was the inclusion of disabled children in mainstream education.

The Equity Group, which was for inclusive education, led one of the first demonstrations at the Church of Scotland general assembly hall, which was then home to the fledgling Scottish Parliament. When I presented evidence to a parliamentary committee in November 1999 on behalf of the Equity Group, I was asked whether there were any limits to being included. I answered with one word: "breathing". Back then, we had spent years trying to develop tools to support teachers to adapt the curriculum and make inclusion easier.

We eventually learned that including children in mainstream education required adaptive, not technical, change. Until teachers truly believed that children with disabilities should be in the classroom, no amount of technical advice made any difference. Once teachers believed that children should be there, they worked out how to adapt the curriculum and be inclusive. It worked best when the teachers experienced what we called a paradigm shift in their thinking. They stopped imagining a perfect class where a kid with disabilities had to fit in and started creating inclusive classrooms where all the kids fit in.

I say that because I absolutely understand the complete frustration of people who have campaigned on the issue that we are discussing today and who are feeling let down. They were promised a bill to uphold and protect the rights of people with autism and learning or intellectual disabilities in the 2021 programme for government. More than 600 individuals and 250 organisations, including charities such as PAMIS in Dundee, responded to the consultation in 2024. The reason why I am standing here now is to say that the rights that people want to legislate for already exist.

The Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004 requires local authorities to make "adequate and efficient provision" for any additional support needs, with no requirement for a diagnosis. The principle of inclusion and support is already the default. The right to inclusion and support is already our baseline position. The issue is not about refining the rights; it is about the ambition and fully ensuring that children and young people with autism or learning disabilities realise the rights that they already have to receive the right support in the right place at the right time.

Joe Long: I recognise that those rights already exist in law, but does Heather Anderson agree that they are simply not being realised and that we need mechanisms for accountability to ensure the realisation of those rights?

Heather Anderson: I completely accept that point, and it is what the next part of my speech is about.

The rest of this Official Report will be published progressively as soon as the text is available.

The rights are there but we know that we are not doing well enough—the people who responded to the consultation told us that. The 2026 review of additional support for learning acknowledged that the current system

“is being asked to meet needs that have grown in scale and complexity.”

For example, in Dundee, 20 per cent of the children who are registered for early learning and childcare have additional support needs, while 36 per cent of primary pupils and 52 per cent of secondary pupils have at least one additional support need. In Dundee, we employ more than 4,500 additional support staff and work with specialist social work, health and voluntary sector services.

Recognition of the scale and complexity of the support that is needed has grown dramatically over the past 26 years, but we do not need legislation to tell us what to do. We know what to do; we should just be doing it much better than we are now. The 2026 review called for a shared national model of intervention, workforce planning, earlier intervention, curriculum redesign, additional support at the core of the system and greater tracking of attainment and impact. I therefore welcome the £7.6 million that the Scottish Government will provide to councils.

I fully understand the disappointment that is felt by many people. It is more than disappointing that we are still falling short of the expectations that we have been trying to meet for more than 20 years—I get that. My inbox is also full of people who are totally frustrated by the current system. That is why our focus must now be on realising the rights that we already have. That means better collaboration with families, more creativity and ingenuity in including children, better accountability and better training for all the staff who are involved. Most importantly, it means not trapping children and their families in long queues for a diagnosis. Waiting for a diagnosis should never delay receiving support, and the real work is to ensure that support is designed around the child, not the diagnosis, and such support should enable the young person to thrive.

Let us focus on getting there, and let us absolutely hold the Government to account to ensure that real progress is made. The minister has been clear about what we are trying to do. If we do not deliver on those details, it is right that we come back and put more pressure on the Government to introduce legislation, but the danger with a bill is that it sometimes delays action until it is delivered. Please let us ensure that we get on with delivering what we need to do right now.

15:58

Katherine Sangster (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab): As other colleagues have stated, the Scottish Government’s decision to abandon the bill was a missed opportunity. People with learning disabilities, autistic people and other neurodivergent people are too often let down by public services that do not understand their needs and do not work effectively for them. Too often, families are left to fight to get the support that they need and deserve, and they simply give up. They have been let down again with the decision to abandon the legislation. I take Heather Anderson’s point about realising rights, but we as MSPs know from our inboxes that that is not happening for many families.

Stakeholders, experts and, most importantly, people with lived experience have dedicated years to the process. They have given their time, shared their experiences and, in many cases, come to the Parliament and revisited deeply personal stories in order to tell us what they need so that we can build a better system for others. It has been much like the debate on the Promise, and the Parliament cannot keep asking some of the most marginalised and vulnerable people to place their trust in the Parliament and to come here and share their experiences to help shape solutions merely for us to fall at the final hurdle and not deliver the change that they need.

The need for action is clear, and action should be taken across all sectors. Nowhere is the need for action more evident than in our schools, which is why I speak in this debate today. Learners with additional support needs are five times more likely to be excluded from school than their peers. If we are committed to inclusion in Scottish schools, we must ask ourselves whether we are adapting our education system to the needs of our children or whether we are continuing to expect our children to adapt to the needs of a system that is inadequate for them.

There remains a gap in training for teachers on how to support autistic and other neurodivergent learners, and we see the consequences of that when children are removed from the classroom rather than being supported to participate in it. Part-time timetables mean that children spend more time out of school without the barriers to getting back into school being addressed.

It is also important to understand that attendance is not participation. Children with autism and other forms of neurodivergence deserve to be happy, supported and able to achieve to the best of their abilities. Inclusion does not simply mean placing a child in a mainstream setting. It must mean creating an environment in which

The rest of this Official Report will be published progressively as soon as the text is available.

they can learn, participate and feel that they belong. Parents have contacted me to say that they sometimes get their child to school only to receive a phone call within an hour or two telling them to come and pick them up. When children are excluded or sent home, we must ask whether we are meeting their needs and who in the public or third sector is stepping in.

Teachers deserve to have the confidence and skills to support the range of needs in their classrooms, and every teacher must have an understanding of autism, neurodivergence and inclusive practices. We could have had the opportunity to introduce mandatory training to establish a consistent standard so that children's experience does not depend on which school they attend or whether the teacher has happened to receive the right support. I am not talking about a week's training course or a certificate that sits on a shelf. There is a need for continuous development and opportunities for reflection. We must ensure that our heads of the future understand what an inclusive school looks like.

Parents deserve to be able to trust that, when they are told that mainstream education is the right setting for their child, that promise will be matched by meaningful support. Instead, exclusion and part-time timetables can leave families carrying the consequences of a system that should be working in partnership with them but is not. Parents should not have to fight for their child to be understood. Countless families can tell stories that demonstrate the need for a more consistent, joined-up approach to public services that is backed by legislation. We are missing the opportunity to provide that.

An LDAN bill would have offered the opportunity to establish mandatory training across the public sector, to improve understanding and to ensure that the provision of support is not dependent on individual organisations, local circumstances or families having to fight for it. People with learning disabilities and autistic people deserve more than warm words and good intentions. They deserve sustainable improvements to public services, meaningful recognition of their rights, and commitments that are written into law so that they can fight for what they deserve and hold local authorities to account.

We have heard from people who are affected, we understand what work needs to be done and we know that there is a need for change. We just need to get on with it. The question now is whether the Scottish Government is prepared to listen and act. We must not allow years of work, lived experience and hope to go to waste. Scotland has the opportunity to do better for people with learning disabilities, autistic people and other neurodivergent people. The Government must think again and bring forward a bill that delivers the lasting change that those communities deserve.

16:03

Paul McLennan (East Lothian Coast and Lammermuirs) (SNP): I thank Adam Harley for lodging his motion for debate.

The debate deals with an issue that is very emotive for our constituents and that makes up a large part of our casework. The motion calls for the introduction of a learning disabilities, autism and neurodivergence bill. I understand the strength of feeling behind that call. Many people with lived experience, families and organisations invested significant time and emotional energy in the consultation process. Constituents are asking for change, and they need it now. That is what they are telling all of us. Their contributions matter, and we have a clear duty to rebuild confidence and trust so that their voices continue to shape reform.

At the recent cross-party event that was organised by Joe Long, which brought together MSPs and groups from all over Scotland, we heard the views of those with lived experience. There was disappointment in the room, and people spoke about the need for action on assessments, pathways for support and support in education.

Maree Todd's amendment takes a practical and responsible approach. I will develop that argument. The amendment seeks to commit the Parliament to significantly improving the support that is available for neurodivergent people, people with a learning disability and autistic people, and it recognises that provision across Scotland is too varied and inconsistent. We hear that all the time.

One of the key things for me, in East Lothian, is that support is inconsistent not just across Scotland but across local authority areas. Indeed, it is inconsistent across schools. The SNP amendment places direct focus on issues that families raise with me every single week:

"reducing waiting lists for neurodivergence assessments, recognising diagnostic pathways, improving accountability, more transparent capture and collation of data and ensuring better support is offered through Scotland's education system".

Those priorities reflect the reality on the ground. In East Lothian Coast and Lammermuirs, as elsewhere, families face long waits and postcode-based differences in provision, and schools are often under pressure when trying to meet additional support needs. Young people and adults need timely help that is based on need and not delayed by process.

The rest of this Official Report will be published progressively as soon as the text is available.

The SNP amendment rightly acknowledges recent measures. The £7.6 million for neurodevelopmental support for children and young people is a welcome and tangible investment, and I was particularly pleased that the minister announced the funding during a visit to Windygoul primary school in East Lothian. That money is to be distributed through local authorities. That is where we as MSPs have a role: ensuring that our local authorities are developing such support and spending that money as best they can. The money will help to deliver more flexible, needs-based support that does not always depend on someone receiving a formal diagnosis first.

Alongside that, the adoption of the Royal College of Psychiatrists' four-level pathway for adults provides a structured approach that includes differential diagnosis and prescribing capabilities, supporting referrals for autism, ADHD and other neurodevelopmental conditions.

Lived experience must remain central—the minister has been hearing that point throughout this process—whether a bill is pursued or not. I am sure that the minister will be touching on that when she speaks at the end of the debate.

The consultation has of course had a significant impact on the LDAN community. People have shared their personal, often difficult, experiences in the hope of driving change. We must ensure that engagement continues in a meaningful way and that policy investment decisions are informed by those who live with these issues every single day.

That brings me to the vital role of the third sector and community groups. The SNP amendment correctly affirms that such organisations “must be properly resourced”. I listened to the point that Katherine Sangster made about other key partners. There are other key partners from which we should expect more. I am meeting the chief executive of East Lothian Council on 9 November to discuss its approach to neurodiversity. Too often, it depends on the school, and it sometimes depends on the headteacher. Changing that is something that the council can take forward itself, and we must all take that forward with our own local authorities to ensure that they are delivering the best support that they possibly can. Of course, councils need support from Government in that regard.

In East Lothian I work closely with Stronger Together for Autism and Neurodivergence, or STAND. About three years ago I helped to set up the organisation, which brought together parents trying to support neurodivergent kids. STAND is an outstanding grass-roots charity that provides practical and emotional support to parents and carers of neurodivergent children. It brings lived experience to the table and runs stay-and-play sessions, peer support groups and activities that create inclusive spaces where families feel welcomed and never alone. That additional support makes a real difference. When I meet parents, I find that some of them have not heard of STAND. I refer them on to STAND, which does an amazing, fantastic job—I want to put that on the record. It has engaged constructively with parliamentary scrutiny, sharing evidence on the challenges that families face around assessment, data and education.

Groups such as STAND fill gaps, advocate effectively, and offer the peer understanding that statutory services alone cannot always provide. The £7.6 million additional investment that has been mentioned should go to supporting organisations such as STAND so that they can give that support to parents who need it. Proper and sustained resourcing for such organisations is essential if we are to deliver consistent improvement across Scotland.

The SNP amendment is clear that changes that can be delivered more quickly

“through policy reform, service improvement and targeted investment must be pursued”—

and pursued now. As a constituency MSP, I will be holding the minister to account, as we all should be.

Daniel Johnson: If that is the case, why did the SNP have a commitment to a bill in its manifesto for the previous election—not the election just gone—and why did it commit to bringing forward a bill in this session? Does the member not understand that there is deep dissatisfaction, given the commitments that the SNP made at two elections?

Paul McLennan: I acknowledged that at the start. That is why it is important to bring forward actions now. The ministers should of course be held to account for what they are doing. I was a minister previously, and I was held to account. Any minister should be held to account, whether they are an SNP MSP or any other member of the Parliament.

Returning to the point about the bill, our amendment mentions keeping the option of an LDAN bill open in this parliamentary session if comprehensive improvements are not achieved. That is something on which we should all be holding the minister to account. I think that the balance in our amendment is right. It prioritises action that can help people sooner, while retaining the possibility of legislation should the evidence show that it is still needed to secure accountability and lasting change.

The rest of this Official Report will be published progressively as soon as the text is available.

As we have all acknowledged, people with learning disabilities, autistic people, neurodivergent people and their families deserve better and more consistent support. They deserve to have shorter waits, clearer pathways, stronger data, improved education provision, and services that listen. In East Lothian, organisations such as STAND show what can be achieved when communities come together. The minister's amendment commits us to building on that spirit nationally through investment, reform, partnership with the third sector, and continued respect for lived experience. I support the minister's amendment and urge colleagues to do the same.

16:10

Laura Moodie (South Scotland) (Green): I am grateful to Adam Harley and his Liberal Democrat colleagues for enabling this important debate in the chamber. For many autistic and neurodivergent people and their families, the debate is not just about legislation; it is about whether Scotland is prepared to match warm words with meaningful action.

The decision to abandon the learning disabilities, autism and neurodivergence bill has caused profound disappointment, not simply because a bill has been dropped, but because of what went into creating it in the first place. Hundreds of autistic and neurodivergent people, their family members, practitioners and organisations gave their time, expertise and lived experience. More than 800 consultation responses were submitted. Advisory panels were established, and stakeholder organisations engaged in good faith. Many young neurodivergent people who are too often excluded from decision making were told that their voices mattered. They were right to expect that their contributions would shape lasting change.

We cannot allow that work or, as others in the chamber have pointed out, that trust to be wasted. It is particularly concerning because we know that the outcomes facing autistic people in Scotland remain deeply unequal. Too many experience poorer physical and mental health, including reduced life expectancy, social isolation, barriers to education and employment, and poorer life chances overall.

Despite years of strategies, policies and commitments, there remains a significant gap between the support that people should receive and the support that they actually get. The Government argues that action is needed now, rather than waiting for legislation, but many families have reasonably asked why, if urgent action was needed, they were asked to wait through years of consultation and delays. Without legislation, where is the accountability that ensures that progress will happen?

Many of the challenges that the bill sought to address are visible every day in our education system. I hear regularly from parents who are battling for the most basic support for their children. Families spend months, often years, fighting for assessments, support plans, classroom adjustments and specialist provision. Too often, they become experts in legislation and bureaucracy simply to secure what their child is entitled to. We know that autistic pupils and other learners with additional support needs are far more likely to face exclusion, reduced timetables and school environments that do not meet their needs.

Daniel Johnson: I recognise the member's characterisation of parents who are battling and have had to become experts in legislation. Those are the parents we hear from. Does the member share my concern about the ones we do not hear from?

Laura Moodie: Absolutely. I am about to come to that precise point.

We know that many teachers and support staff are doing their absolute best in a system that is stretching them beyond all capacity. As Daniel Johnson has pointed out, for some families, the struggle becomes so overwhelming that home education feels as though it is the only option that is left. That decision is often presented as a choice that people have made when, in reality, many parents describe it as a last resort when the support that is needed for their child to thrive simply is not available.

When that happens, the consequences extend beyond the classroom. Parents reduce their hours or may leave employment entirely, household incomes and family wellbeing suffer, and opportunities are lost. Researchers have taken to describing that group of caregivers as ghost parents: people whose labour, stress and sacrifices keep the system functioning but whose experiences, too often, are completely invisible. Their contribution is rarely acknowledged and the support that they need is hardly ever provided.

The LDAN bill was never going to solve all those problems overnight, but it offered the possibility of accountability, better data, improved training, clearer duties on public bodies and, crucially, a whole-life and whole-system approach to improving outcomes.

The Government really has to demonstrate how those ambitions will now be delivered, because what autistic and neurodivergent people, their families and campaigners need is not another promise of future action: they need confidence that their voices have been heard, that their years of engagement were not in

vain, and that Scotland remains committed to building a society where neurodivergent people can truly flourish.

16:15

Emma Roddick (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP): I attended Joe Long's recent meeting on the LDAN bill. Like many, I sent my RSVP before the news arrived that the bill would not be taken forward. Like colleagues who have already spoken, I am passionate about doing better by those who have learning disabilities and those who are autistic or neurodivergent, and I am worried.

A chunk of the cases that I have had open for the longest time relate either to parents of children who are not getting the help, diagnosis or treatment that they deserve—often completely unable to access public services as basic as education—or to adults who are struggling with their condition but are lost in a system that cannot handle their referral. I have dozens of cases like that with no resolution in sight. People cannot believe the situations they are being left in. Often, they tell me that they are out of work, that their relationship has broken up or that they are suicidal. We are losing economic contributions, childhood opportunities and even lives, due to systems that we all know are not working.

I had real problems with some of the suggestions for the bill in the previous parliamentary session. I always supported the principle, but, at the time, I disagreed with the plans for a commissioner and with the bill sitting in the health portfolio. There is still a real problem with disability in general sitting in the health portfolio. Given that work is going on elsewhere in Government on mainstreaming and human rights incorporation, it felt really problematic for the cross-cutting systemic issues that the learning disability community and neurodivergent people face to be addressed by a bill that sat in the health portfolio alone. I had that conversation with the minister when I was the minister responsible for disability and mainstreaming equality. That was three years ago.

I agree that plenty can be done faster without legislation, but that is a pretty hollow point to make given that a bill was expected in the previous parliamentary session, there is still not clarity on what will be done and how quickly, and documents produced in the previous session stated it would not be a stand-alone solution and legislation alone was never going to fix the issues. The key elements that I felt that a bill should address were data collection, mandatory training and protection from discrimination. We still need detail on how those things can be improved without legislation.

There is nothing in the Government's amendment to the motion that I can disagree with, but more detail and clarity are needed. The amendment talks about data collection, but is that going to be mandatory collection? If so, will that be done through secondary legislation or is that yet to be determined? The amendment also says that the option remains to introduce legislation in this parliamentary session

"if improvements are not comprehensively made."

Given the lead-in time for a bill, the logical conclusion is that something will be done very soon—in other words, in the next 12 months. Otherwise, I do not see how results would be both visible and able to be fully assessed in time for legislation to be consulted upon and then brought in before the next election.

That raises more questions: when will we across the chamber get the opportunity to debate proposals, when will members of the public have the opportunity to give their views, and when will the changes be implemented? I hope the minister can enlighten us on these questions, because the strength of feeling of stakeholders, neurodivergent people in Scotland and colleagues across the chamber is palpable. If the Government is sincere, which I believe it is, in its declaration that fast change is needed, we all deserve more information on what that looks like and when we can expect to see it.

The second key issue, which has been noted by others, is that the Government and committees of the Parliament asked a lot of people with lived experience to share their experience. People have shared their trauma. They have spilled their guts for politicians, because they thought it was worth doing that, if it meant that others were not going to suffer as much as they did.

Folk repeated themselves over and over, hearing the choruses of, "I found today's evidence very distressing", and I have seen colleagues leaning in with their hand up, trying to get in as quickly as possible to state how moved they were by what they just heard. Affected communities heard and saw that, too, and we owe them action.

Finally, I want to cover the issue of assessments. I welcome the efforts that are being made to provide support for people in their community, to support neurodivergent children in schools and to provide advice that is currently not accessible through the NHS. However, although the Royal College of Psychiatrists proposal will undoubtedly help, there is not yet enough information on what will change for children and when.

The rest of this Official Report will be published progressively as soon as the text is available.

The lower tiers in the proposed plan will need to be handled carefully, given the awful experiences that people have had with the term “self-help” and a history of being sent home with a leaflet or a link to a website.

Psychiatric services are struggling with referrals because the system is still treating neurodevelopmental disorders as mental health issues that always require lifelong psychiatric intervention, which we know is just not true. The patient or person-centred approach that we always hear about does not seem to exist yet when it comes to neurodivergence and learning disabilities—or, for that matter, mental health. Those conditions are all still highly medicalised, stigmatised and referred into services that are not relevant or appropriate. We can address that without primary legislation, but the implementation of the fourth tier, in particular, and how we treat children will be key. I hope that the minister will have more to say on that at the end of the debate.

I hope that colleagues from across the chamber will be proven wrong on the necessity of legislation and that we will hear from key stakeholders in a couple of years that the service improvement that has been promised has been transformational for people across Scotland. The minister said in her opening speech that a bill would not change lives today. My cases will not be resolved today. We need clear timescales for when the people out there who are suffering today can expect to see change.

16:22

Yi-pei Chou Turvey (North East Scotland) (LD): Justice is a quality of being fair, moral and right. The way that our criminal justice system interacts with people with learning disabilities, autism and neurodivergence is none of those things. Not only is that not fair, moral or right but it is expensive, irresponsible and counterproductive.

The Scottish Liberal Democrats get limited time on the chamber floor. Given the opportunity, we have come here today simply to ask the Government to move forward with its own legislation. We have already lost precious time, and nothing has changed.

The LDAN bill that the Government abandoned sought in part to address a fundamental flaw in our criminal justice system and to identify those in the system with learning disabilities, autism and neurodivergence, or LDAN, with the aim of delivering justice more effectively.

I am keen for members across the Parliament to recognise that people with LDAN experience the justice system in a unique way, which is often poorly understood. Research by Dr Caitlin Gormley shone a light on their lived experience. Chloe described difficulty with managing day-to-day life in prison, and stated:

“I fill the canteen sheet out myself, but I can’t count very well”.

Drew talked about his difficulty assessing his medication in prison, as his low level of literacy made filling out forms extremely difficult. Karen talked about easily being taken advantage of by other prisoners, understanding that she struggled with social communication. Dr Gormley described people being used as pawns to take the punishment for more sophisticated criminals; people being pushed to breaking point due to lack of support and understanding from wider society; and even people craving the security and predictability that imprisonment can offer—a bed, a meal and some company.

There is an obvious flaw in the system. To address it, we need accurate and current data, which the passage of an LDAN bill would facilitate. That is why we need it back on the table.

We have some limited data, which suggests the scope of the hidden problem. A 2012 report by the Children and Young People’s Commissioner Scotland showed that incidence rates of communication disorders among young offenders were at 60 to 90 per cent, and a pilot project that the Scottish Prison Service carried out in 2016 showed figures of around 40 per cent in its adult population. All signs point towards a significant percentage of offenders with some kind of LDAN, partnered with a system that does not recognise those vulnerabilities and does not work to provide justice in a way that delivers desired results.

I am not excusing criminal offending; neither do I seek to minimise the effect of crime on victims. However, I urge members to listen. Our prisons are full, yet we have the one of the highest prison populations in western Europe. If, due to disability, a large chunk of our prison population gets no meaningful punishment or rehabilitation through their imprisonment, what is the point? If I were to tell members that 40 per cent of our prison population was blind or had some level of sight impairment, would they co-sign a decision to go on as normal, passing out leaflets and forms and putting up signage? They would not. All of us would consider that foolish, and a waste of time.

If we had the data, might we look at our prison population differently? The key asks in the bill, which was developed by the sitting Government, called for people with LDAN to be better identified across all of their interactions with the criminal justice system. Identifying individuals for whom traditional sentencing is inappropriate can form a key pillar of reducing our prison population while retaining public confidence. If we

The rest of this Official Report will be published progressively as soon as the text is available.

need more beds, do those have to be in prisons? Could we not accept the possibility that our relatively high prison population might be a reflection of the lack of social services that help to look after the most vulnerable?

Furthermore, there is clear evidence that, without support to achieve equal access to housing, employment, education and meaningful relationships, people who have a learning disability are at an increased risk of reoffending. The Government has promised the people of Scotland that it is a Government of the people—that it understands us and is our public servant. The person-centred care that the Scottish Government holds in such high esteem cannot be achieved without accurately identifying what needs might require additional support and which people have those needs. Unless set in statute, sufficient levels of accommodation and support will get lost along the way, at a cost to the victims, the vulnerable offenders and the taxpayer. Is that justice? Is our current system fair, moral and right?

I ask the Parliament to come together and refine the legislation if necessary, in order to get it right and finally get it over the line.

16:28

Colm Merrick (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): I thank Adam Harley for bringing to the chamber what is an important debate, and for the obvious passion and dedication that he has shown in pursuing the issue.

The debate has, in the most part, been constructive—in particular, in showing that there is a real and genuine consensus on the need to improve the lives of people with learning disabilities, autistic people and neurodivergent people. I welcome that consensus, even if we have different ideas on how best to deliver those improvements, which we all recognise are necessary. Those differences are legitimate, and I believe that, to get the legislation right, we have to work together to achieve our common aims.

There is no question—or, indeed, argument—but that significant challenges remain. Too many people continue to experience long waits for assessment, difficulties in accessing appropriate support, and inconsistencies in the services that are available to them.

I also recognise the disappointment that is felt by those who have campaigned for the introduction of the LDAN bill and the considerable work that has been undertaken by organisations and individuals who contributed to its development.

Their contributions have been important in identifying where improvements are needed, and that evidence must continue to inform the Government's approach. The Minister for Mental Wellbeing, Public Health, Sport, Alcohol and Drugs, Ms Todd, set out the Scottish Government's position in her statement to Parliament on 7 October. She explained that the decision not to progress the bill was based on an assessment that legislation would take "several years" to develop and implement, potentially delaying improvements that individuals and families need right now.

Instead, the Government is committed to prioritising policy reform, improvements to services, and targeted investment. Importantly, the minister also made clear that future legislation has not been ruled out, should the evidence demonstrate that additional statutory measures are required. I believe that that is a reasonable position, provided that the commitment to delivering improvements is matched by clear action and measurable progress.

In his speech, Mr Harley raised the important issue of mandatory training for public sector workers. In responding, the minister acknowledged the need to improve training and understanding across public services and outlined opportunities to make progress through existing mechanisms, including NHS employment contracts. That exchange illustrates precisely where there is considerable common ground. There may be disagreement about whether legislation is the most effective immediate route, but there should be no disagreement about the need for better training, greater consistency and stronger accountability.

There is work already under way that deserves recognition. The Scottish Government has announced an additional £7.6 million to strengthen neurodevelopmental support for children, young people and families. The 2026-27 Scottish budget also includes more than £57 million for additional support for learning. Following the McManus review, work is progressing on a national staged intervention model that is intended to improve consistency in identifying, planning and delivering support for children with additional support needs. That is particularly important, because access to appropriate support should be determined by individual need rather than being dependent on a formal diagnosis.

The Government has also committed to adopting a national adult pathway for neurodevelopmental conditions, recognising the need for greater consistency in the support that is available to adults. Those are important commitments, although I recognise that much remains to be done.

The rest of this Official Report will be published progressively as soon as the text is available.

We need to ensure that any commitments translate into accessible support, shorter waiting times and more consistent provision across Scotland. That also means continuing to engage directly with people with lived experience, their families and the organisations representing them. I therefore encourage the minister to continue to work constructively with Mr Harley and others despite the differences on the question of legislation. There is considerable common ground, and I believe that it can provide a sound basis for constructive engagement going forward. It is in that spirit that I support the Scottish Government's amendment, for although it rightly prioritises changes that can be delivered now, it does not close the door on legislation during the current session of Parliament, as it states, if comprehensive improvements are not achieved.

I believe that the Government's amendment reflects the common ground that we have heard expressed across the chamber today. I also believe that it provides a constructive and credible way forward towards achieving the aims that we all share. That is why I will be supporting the Government's amendment, and I encourage colleagues across the chamber to do likewise.

16:33

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh North Western) (LD): I listened to the minister's opening remarks with baffled amazement at the wilful lack of understanding of what we are actually trying to do here today. Enshrining rights and protections for our most vulnerable citizens in legislation is not a retreat, or else what on earth are we doing here? Why legislate for anything? What does it mean for people to have human rights if they cannot exercise those rights? What does the right to live independently mean if there is no support to help someone leave hospital? What does the right to be heard mean if there is no advocacy to help someone to challenge a decision made by other people about their life?

For too many Scots with learning disabilities, and for autistic or neurodivergent people in Scotland, those are not hypothetical questions. That is the reality of so many—all too many—of their lives. The Mental Welfare Commission for Scotland has identified 55 people with learning difficulties or disabilities and complex needs who have spent more than 10 years in hospital. In fact, their average stay was 18 years and two months. The Scottish Human Rights Commission has warned us that the Scottish Government's "Coming Home Action Plan" failed to comply with basic requirements and breached the rights to independent living of people with learning disabilities or autism.

Behind those alarming reports are people—human beings—whose lives are passing them by and who have no say in what happens to them, and families fighting for basic rights that so many of us in this chamber take for granted. In 2023, families of young adults locked away in hospitals protested outside this very Parliament, and many of us went to see them. One mum, Sylvia, spoke of her son Jamie, who had been locked in hospital units for nearly seven years despite doctors saying that it was not appropriate for him to be there. He was recorded as a delayed discharge in January 2017, meaning that he should have been moved into the community, but no appropriate options were ever found. Sylvia said:

"There's such a big difference in him now. He has no tooth at the front. His eyes are so sad looking sometimes. He had such a good family life. It feels so wrong. They don't listen to families and I feel like a broken record."

Another mum, Karen, spoke of her son Fraser. She said:

"We had to visit him through the mesh at his bedroom window on Christmas day ... He is so institutionalised now ... There's no support for him. We had complained far and wide. We shouldn't be locking people away with special needs behind closed doors. They have a right to life like everybody else."

Those testimonies are devastating. I can only imagine what the people who are directly involved must feel. That is what human rights failure looks like. Independent living should mean freedom, dignity, family life, choice and control over your future. Those are not optional extras.

That is why the LDAN bill matters. Rights that exist on paper but cannot be exercised in practice are not rights at all. One of the bill's most important contributions could have been the creation of a right to independent advocacy, which is the best safeguard that we can offer people with vulnerabilities to ensure that their views are always heard, their rights are respected and they can challenge decisions that are made about their lives. To not provide that via legislation is also incredibly short-sighted in the context of public service reform, with research by the Henry Smith Foundation showing that every £1 that we invest in independent advocacy can save the NHS and local authorities £12.

People with learning disabilities, autistic people and neurodivergent people should not have to fight endlessly to have their rights realised. Those rights already belong to them. It is our job to make them a reality. I hope that every party will support our motion at decision time tonight.

16:37

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): When people say that politics is personal, this is what it means to me. I must say that it is really hard for me to write about something as important as this when I have spent my life as a neurodivergent person feeling misunderstood and worrying that it will happen again.

Years ago, a professional told me that my child could not be autistic because he made eye contact. At home, we barely slept. He climbed out of windows, escaped through cat flaps and ran across busy roads completely unaware of the danger. He climbed an eight-foot fence to escape from school. He dug holes into our walls in the house. I had tried everything and tried so hard, but nothing was working.

And then there was the judgment. I remember a parent saying to me when they were giving out birthday party invitations to the rest of his class and they missed him out, "That kid just needs a good hiding." Imagine hearing that when you are already exhausted, worried, sick, and doing everything that you possibly can to try to advocate for your child.

Eventually, after a very long battle, he was diagnosed as being autistic and, later, having ADHD. That gave me access to a course—an early bird course, it was called at the time—where I met people who finally understood the life that we had been living without judging my parenting. One evening, I opened a book that I had borrowed from that course. It was "Martian in the Playground" by Clare Sainsbury. I read the first pages through tears, not because I recognised my child, but because I recognised myself. School, work and relationships—so much of my life finally made sense.

That is why diagnosis is not just a label. I have seen the difference when a teacher understands. My child seemed completely different from one school to the next, but he was the same child—it was just that the understanding was different. I have also sat in a meeting in a school, after diagnosis, and heard a teacher say to my child, "But that wasn't your ADHD—that was just you." I saw the educational psychologist peep up from her notes, scowling. That is the type of misunderstanding that we are battling, so I want people to know this: I know, I see you and I validate your experiences.

Imagine getting instructions that might as well be in another language, or getting work wrong at school and being told, "You're not even trying." Classroom observations matter, but they cannot become a barrier to any type of assessment. Teachers need training and specialist support, but we do not need legislation for mandatory training. I would like to see that implemented as soon as possible.

A right on paper is not enough if families cannot access it in practice. When a child is repeatedly sent home, who leaves work? Who cuts their hours? How does a parent hold down a job around that? We discuss getting parents into work and breaking cycles of poverty as though those are separate conversations. We must consider the adult who wants to work but struggles to organise tasks, judge time or complete applications. That can be due to executive dysfunction and not a lack of ambition. Do more complicated forms help? No. When we add in poverty, care experience and disability, the barriers only grow.

I have been on some prison visits lately where people told me about their ADHD, their drug use and how they ended up there. A Swedish study of nearly 150,000 people with ADHD associated medication with lower rates of substance misuse and criminal convictions. Tomorrow, we will debate alcohol and drug deaths, and that evidence belongs in that debate, too. When somebody reaches services in desperation, with depression, anxiety or eating disorders, are their neurodevelopmental needs being understood, too?

Dr Jason Lang made an analogy related to ASN in schools that has stuck with me. If 43 per cent of a supermarket's customers could not reach the shelves, would it keep sending staff around with stepladders or would it redesign the shelves? We keep handing out individual adjustments to help people to survive systems that were never designed with them in mind. Sometimes the answer is to change the system. Clearer instructions, predictable processes and more accessible environments make things better for everybody.

If the Scottish Government wants to tackle drug deaths and alcohol harm, it must look at neurodivergence. If it wants to reduce crime, it must look at neurodivergence. If it wants to break cycles of poverty, improve attainment and help people to stay in work, it must look at neurodivergence. If it wants fewer people to reach mental health crisis, it must look at neurodivergence. I am not asking the Government to put its other priorities aside; I am asking it to understand that neurodivergence is a part of how it delivers them. As much as we are trauma informed, we must be neurodivergence informed in public services, in private workplaces and in how we write policy.

I understand why people want a bill, but I do not want a bill to be the be-all and end-all. It might be part of an answer—I just do not believe that it is the whole answer. People have explained the problem to us enough. The next stage has to be delivery, training, accessible routes to assessment, support through transitions, and stronger duties where the evidence tells us that they are needed. I will work across parties to do those things.

The rest of this Official Report will be published progressively as soon as the text is available.

Before this parliamentary session ends, I want to see fewer children being sent home, fewer parents being forced out of work, fewer people reaching the point where they use drugs or alcohol to self-medicate for their distress, and fewer lives being pulled into the criminal justice system through the harm that can follow addiction. I want more people to get help before they reach crisis.

Understanding myself helped me to become a better mother and a stronger advocate for my children, and that journey brought me here. However, somebody who struggles just to get washed or to leave the house and then blames themselves for it deserves that understanding just as much as somebody who stands in this chamber. I found that understanding by chance in a book. Imagine what could change if that understanding was there from the beginning in our schools, our workplaces and every service that people turned to for help. It should not depend on chance for everyone.

We should keep the conversation on legislation going, but we must make progress on delivering for our neurodivergent population and hold services to account for the obligations that they are failing on now. Neurodivergent voices have told us what they need and it is time to take action.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): We move to closing speeches.

16:45

Alexander Burnett (Aberdeenshire West) (Con): As the founder of the cross-party group on autism and its co-convenor for the past decade, I am pleased to speak in the debate and to add my voice to calls for the Scottish Government to bring back the learning disabilities, autism and neurodivergence bill before the end of 2027.

For many years, autistic people, other neurodivergent individuals and people with learning disabilities, alongside their families and carers, have campaigned for change. They want improvements to diagnostic pathways and support in education and employment and across all parts of life.

I acknowledge that many autistic and neurodivergent people are concerned about being grouped with learning disabilities under a single legislative framework. Those perspectives deserve to be heard and respected. However, regardless of where people stand on that, there is broad agreement that Scotland's current system is failing and that meaningful reform can no longer be delayed. I believe that there is broad agreement on that across the chamber, too.

Although I support the aims of the bill that was proposed, I want to be clear that my party did not support the proposal for a commissioner. When public finances are under pressure, creating another publicly funded office is not the answer. Scrutiny, accountability and responsibility for delivering services should rest with Government ministers and not with another taxpayer-funded layer of bureaucracy. If services are failing, ministers should be held accountable and ministers should be required to put those failures right.

The focus of a new bill must be on improving outcomes, rather than on creating new structures that risk duplicating existing functions and diverting funds away from front-line services. I hear regularly from constituents and stakeholders about the barriers that they continue to face. Across Aberdeenshire, adults who suspect that they might be autistic or have ADHD increasingly find themselves with nowhere to turn. NHS assessment pathways have been removed for adults, which has left people to face years of uncertainty with little or no prospect of obtaining a diagnosis through the NHS.

The result is that many people feel that they have to go private, paying thousands of pounds to do so. To make matters worse, private diagnoses are not consistently recognised by the NHS, which creates uncertainty about what support can be accessed. Behind every one of those cases is a person whose education, employment, relationships and mental health suffer as a result.

We often talk about neurodiversity in relation to policy, but for many constituents it is simply about getting answers. We must also address the pressures that children face. Families throughout Scotland continue to raise concerns about child and adolescent mental health services. Too many young people experience long waits for assessments. Delays can have lasting consequences for neurodivergent children and those with learning disabilities. When support is unavailable, difficulties in school escalate, educational attainment suffers, mental health deteriorates and families are left navigating complex systems while trying to support children who are already struggling. Parents should not have to fight at every stage of a journey to secure help for their child, and nor should teachers be left unsupported to meet complex needs in the classroom.

Those challenges are even more acute in rural communities. Constituents in Aberdeenshire West face longer travel distances and fewer local services. Geography should not determine whether someone can access timely diagnosis or effective support.

The rest of this Official Report will be published progressively as soon as the text is available.

The abandonment of a bill during the previous parliamentary session was a significant disappointment for many people who had invested time and hope in progress. Stakeholders, charities and individuals drafted responses to the previous consultation in good faith, because they believed that real progress was possible. The SNP now has an opportunity to rebuild that trust. A new bill should focus on improving access to diagnosis and strengthening support across education and healthcare.

Ultimately, this debate is about ensuring that neurodivergent individuals and people with learning disabilities can live independent, fulfilling lives and access the support they need, when they need it. That requires more than just warm words from this Government.

I urge the Scottish Government to commit to introducing a bill before the end of 2027, holding ministers accountable for delivering improvements and providing the certainty, support and opportunities that thousands of individuals and families across Aberdeenshire and across Scotland have waited far too long to see.

16:50

Cara McKee (West Scotland) (Green): I thank Adam Harley for bringing this important debate to the chamber. It is clear that there is a lot of agreement across the parties on the topic. As my colleagues have said, the Scottish Greens would welcome the reintroduction of an LDAN bill. We also believe that action is required now. As lots of members noted, many people have put themselves in a vulnerable position to share their needs. Miles Briggs and Laura Moodie, among others, have been clear that we owe it to consultees to take their input seriously.

We are committed to introducing legislation to underpin rights and support for people with learning disabilities, autism and neurodivergence. Emma Roddick has pointed out that this should not be considered solely a health issue. Laura Moodie, Katherine Sangster and others have highlighted its impact on education, while Yi-pei Chou Turvey and Karen Adam have drawn attention to its impact on the justice system. As Kayleigh Kinross-O'Neill eloquently observed, we recognise that, although policy change is important, some things must be enshrined in law; otherwise, any policy sits on a shoochy peg. The community is telling us that legislation is needed, and we should listen.

I, like many other members, constantly speak to folk who are struggling to access the support that they need and are being disabled by systems in our schools and prisons and throughout society. They are told by the Scottish ministers that they do not need a diagnosis or an assessment to access support, but that is simply not the case when public services are stretched.

I appreciate that the SNP amendment recognises the need to improve services now, which is clearly necessary, but legislation is required too. Maree Todd has said that we should see what works first before possibly introducing legislation, but it is clear that services will need to be tailored to best serve our communities and to develop in light of what we learn. However, there are Scotland-wide standards and frameworks that should be enshrined in law, and we must show all those who have contributed to developing an LDAN bill so far the respect that they deserve.

We want an LDAN bill to be brought back, measures put in place to ensure that support is genuinely not dependent on diagnosis or assessment and assessment waiting lists reduced.

16:53

David Smith (West Scotland) (Reform): Like many other members, I have received a lot of emails from concerned constituents. I will quote what Dominic Morris said in one of them:

"I was a paid member of the Lived Experience Advisory Panel, employed by the Scottish Government to contribute to the scoping, consultation, and draft provisions for the Bill. We worked hard on this process for over 3 years and shared lived experiences that were raw and personal to us. It was devastating when all that work was for nothing. Neurodivergence and learning disabilities are not a trend, and we deserve to be heard and seen. The Bill offered us hope and opportunity."

I also received a letter from Mark McDonald, who is the policy and media manager for Scottish Autism. He wrote:

"Alongside other third sector organisations, disabled persons' organisations and individuals with lived experience, we were extremely disheartened by the Scottish Government's decisions not to progress the Learning Disabilities, Autism and Neurodivergence Bill.

For us, and many stakeholders, the proposed legislation represented an important opportunity to strengthen the realisation of rights for autistic people, neurodivergent people and people with learning difficulties. The bill was not simply about creating new structures and processes; it was about addressing the persistent gap between rights recognised in policy and legislation, and people's actual experiences and exercising those rights in everyday life."

The rest of this Official Report will be published progressively as soon as the text is available.

Reform welcomes the motion lodged by Adam Harley and will support it. We will also support Joe Long's amendment.

The Scottish Government's amendment states that there is a

"need to rebuild confidence and trust with people",

but who broke that trust and confidence in the first place? Introducing an LDAN bill was part of the SNP's 2021 manifesto commitments. Although there was no similar commitment in the 2026 manifesto, significant work had been undertaken in the years leading up to the most recent election, and many people in the LDAN community will have voted for the SNP on the back of that work.

The Government amendment

"agrees that support across the country is too varied and inconsistent".

However, as the Government is now rushing towards public sector reform, the need for an overarching policy to drive improvements and nominate those accountable has never been greater.

Reform's amendment recognises that

"immediate measures can be taken in the meantime",

and the Government must recognise that its proposed public sector reform agenda demonstrates that large-scale reform can be delivered at pace if there is political will behind it.

Our education system provides us with the earliest opportunities to improve the lives of people in the LDAN community. My son has learning difficulties and attended Kilpatrick school, which is a specialist school for children with additional support needs. He remained in the school for as long as he could and then attempted the transition to college. He was turned down for a place at West College Scotland's Clydebank campus because of one bad day that he had while on a visit. He spent a couple of months at home, not in work or education, and we very quickly learned how few opportunities there actually were in our local area. This led him into depression and he spent days in his room, not wanting to come out. Eventually we got him into West College Scotland's Paisley campus to complete the same course that he would have completed at the Clydebank campus.

Some members might be surprised to learn that ASN training for teachers is not mandatory and that teachers unions and parents have been highlighting the shortfall for years. We acknowledge that there are national resources such as the autism toolkit and the addressing dyslexia toolkit, but on their own those resources do not go far enough. Improving such training and making its provision mandatory do not need to wait for an LDAN bill to be introduced.

Housing is another area in which the Government can progress work now. The Scottish strategy for autism was a 10-year plan that was launched in 2011. In the evaluation of the strategy that was completed in 2021, housing was identified as an area in which significant improvement was still needed. Work on housing does not need to wait for an LDAN bill to be introduced—it should be progressed now.

Reducing out-of-area placements, where people with severe autism and complex needs are housed many miles from their families, is another issue that can and should be addressed urgently. With public sector reform effectively meaning that we will extend our local authority boundaries, there is a worry that the issue could be masked from the Government. An LDAN bill would be an incredibly useful tool through which that issue could be addressed. Let us be very clear: this urgent matter can and should be addressed now.

An LDAN bill would assign accountability and bring together one coherent policy that is clear and concise and that puts people at the centre. That is what Reform supports. We urge the whole Parliament to get behind the Lib Dem motion and all the amendments aside from that of the Government, which, in its usual fashion, seeks to avoid any accountability.

16:59

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): I remind members of my own diagnosis. I, too, thank the Liberal Democrats for bringing the debate to the chamber. It is important that we have transparency on this matter. To be frank, the only reason why this issue—that of the LDAN bill not being progressed—has been raised is because Opposition parties pushed for a statement and called for a debate. That needs to be recognised.

There have been a great number of excellent contributions from across the chamber. I begin by highlighting Emma Roddick's, which hit a particular point on the head. One of our biggest problems is that the issue falls across big policy silos in health, education, social services and justice. We all know that, despite people's

The rest of this Official Report will be published progressively as soon as the text is available.

best efforts and the good intentions of policy, legislation is very often required to break down those silos. My big fear is that, without legislation, we simply will not break down the silos in the education and health systems. It is notable that, although many members have made points about the education system, we have only health ministers here to address the point. The composition of the Government's front bench demonstrates one of the fundamental problems and why we need legislation.

I will address a number of the reasons that the minister gave for not progressing the bill. Time and again, she said that we need transparency, but was the Government being transparent in March, when it published draft proposals for legislation and future work and it assured stakeholders that the Government was not cancelling or ditching the bill? When did the Government make the decision that it was going to drop the bill? When did it decide that it could not take it forward? Was the Government being transparent then?

Was it being transparent when it tried to drop the bill by simply writing to committees rather than bringing a statement to the chamber, which it did only because Opposition parties requested it? If the Government is being transparent and has plans that make legislation unnecessary, where are they? It should publish them. My suspicion is that they do not exist.

Let us look at the other reasons that the minister gave for not proceeding with legislation. She said that legislation would not help and is not needed. I suggest that that is not correct. For example, on definitions, we know that some health boards will not provide access to or put people on waiting lists for combined assessments. In essence, people have to do sequential assessments for ADHD and autism—that is, one at a time. However, we know that comorbidity is very prevalent. Through definitions, we could break down those things. Until recently, some health boards were denying ADHD assessments to adults, because they said that, if ADHD was not present in an individual when they were a child, they could not have ADHD. Having definitions would prevent those sorts of things from happening.

A number of members have made the point that we do not need legislation in order to provide training. That is true, but we all know what happens if training is not made mandatory or a statutory requirement: it gets cut. Currently, there are no training requirements for a large number of public sector workers who want access to training on neurodiversity. Healthcare workers have been name checked, and there is a need for continuous professional development for teachers. When I was on the Justice Committee two sessions ago, we took evidence from prison officers who said that they wanted training on autism and ADHD. We need legislation to require such training and to ensure that it happens.

The minister talked about the proposal for another commissioner. There does not need to be a commissioner, but we need a person to oversee the system and ensure that the silos do not persist. I am sure that, from within the 9,000 people who work in the Scottish Government, we could find someone to fulfil that role. However, it will not happen unless we have legislation, because these things never happen on their own.

Finally, on time, what has the Government been doing? There was a commitment in 2021 and the process has been under way for more than five years. People engaged in that process in good faith. They gave their time and told their stories, as so many members have pointed out. Most importantly, third sector organisations—the organisations that we value and trust—engaged earnestly and sincerely, but to absolutely no end whatsoever.

Confidence among people with neurodivergent conditions and the organisations that work in the sector is shattered and gone. They have no confidence that the Scottish Government will deliver on neurodiversity. Quite frankly, given the minister's track record and her role as a minister in the previous parliamentary session—she was the minister who was charged with taking this area forward for several years—and given the way in which she has come to the Parliament in recent days, I think that they have no confidence in her.

17:05

The Minister for Community Care (Alison Thewliss): I thank all members from across the Parliament for the contributions that they have made to the debate. The Minister for Mental Wellbeing, Public Health, Sport, Alcohol and Drugs and I have listened carefully to the points that have been made.

The debate has clearly demonstrated the strength of feeling on the issue and the shared desire across the Parliament to improve outcomes for people with learning disabilities, autistic people and neurodivergent people. There has been no disagreement on the need to improve outcomes for the LDAN community; we are united as a Parliament on that point.

We have heard many differing views on how we should achieve our ambition to build a better and more inclusive Scotland—a Scotland where people who need support can access it when they need it. Karen Adam mentioned in her speech that there needs to be a recognition of neurodivergence and autism in all policies.

The rest of this Official Report will be published progressively as soon as the text is available.

That is a good ambition and it is one that we should have. This is not a policy area that should sit in one department; it affects everybody, and we should all take that to heart in the way that we work.

Some people remain convinced that primary legislation is the only way forward and that we need to wait for it to be introduced, debated and implemented. I simply do not agree. Action, change and investment are needed now. Kayleigh Kinross-O'Neill said that we should send a message. Frankly, I do not think that sending a message should be the purpose of legislation, because that is, quite simply, not enough—people deserve better than that.

Willie Rennie (Fife North East) (LD): The minister will have been listening carefully to the contributions that have been made to the debate. I have not heard a single member say that we should only introduce legislation and wait until that legislation is implemented before we do anything. Does she not feel a slight discomfort that, like with many other announcements, the Government waited until after the election to tell communities that they will not get what they thought they were going to get?

Alison Thewliss: From our side of things, there is an acceptance that legislation is not enough. We also need to recognise that acting to introduce legislation will divert time and resource—that is a fact.

As many members have done—particularly Emma Roddick, Colm Merrick, Katherine Sangster, Paul McLennan and Laura Moodie—I recognise the contribution of the LDAN community. I recognise not only the community's more formal contributions, which have informed today's debate and the early development of the LDAN bill, but its contribution to society as a whole. Its unique and diverse perspectives and talents make Scotland a better place. I challenge those members who have implied that the LDAN community's contribution somehow does not matter to us or has been discarded in some way. That could not be further from the truth; its contribution matters deeply and will continue to be carried forward in the Government's work.

Many members—particularly Karen Adam, Daniel Johnson and David Smith, who shared their own experiences—have spoken about the importance of rights, accountability and lived experience. Many members have also heard repeatedly from their constituents, families and advocacy organisations and reflected their concerns about the need for change. I hear those concerns, too. Several members have highlighted challenges in accessing support and services and the critical need to address waiting times for diagnosis. Those are real issues that impact on real lives.

Miles Briggs referred to legislation, particularly the Autism Act 2009 in England. In November 2025, the House of Lords Autism Act 2009 Committee noted that, despite the legislation, outcomes “have not improved”.

I will quote further from the committee's report. It said:

“the Act and successive autism strategies have failed to tackle the key barriers that stand in the way of improving outcomes ... Responsibility and accountability for meeting autistic people's needs are fragmented, meaning services have little incentive to provide timely support.”

That act was passed in 2009. We should think very carefully about whether legislation would have an impact on what we need to do. Given that the House of Lords has found that, after such a long period of time was spent on legislation in England, things are no further forward, we must reflect on whether we would get any further forward were we to act in the same way. We must not make the same mistakes. As my ministerial colleague said at the outset of the debate, we must be open, honest and transparent about what can be achieved through legislation.

Miles Briggs: I think that it is good that the House of Lords was able to look at what was working and what was not working. In Scotland, we have not had that opportunity. We had a bill that has been taken away.

We know what could work and what lessons have been learned from the House of Lords report. Fundamentally, a bill would put rights for people on the statute book, which is what they are asking for. Does the minister acknowledge that simply hoping that such rights will be put in place is not acceptable and that a bill is the only way of achieving that?

Alison Thewliss: I do not believe that a bill is the only way of achieving that, and I think that I have made that clear in my comments today. As Heather Anderson said, quite movingly, we know what we need to do. We have heard the evidence on what we need to do, and we should be in the business of getting on with that. As our amendment makes clear, we do not have all the answers, and we remain open to the option of legislation, should evidence indicate during the current session that that is necessary. We have been clear about that.

There is enough common ground across the Parliament to drive forward the reforms that people, their families and their loved ones so desperately need to see. We need to seize on that ambition and work together to put in place better systems and support now. Our approach is about being joined up and reflecting the increased societal awareness, particularly of neurodivergence, since the LDAN bill was first mooted more

The rest of this Official Report will be published progressively as soon as the text is available.

than five years ago. We must also take into account the presumption that was set out by Parliament last summer against the creation of any new commissioner or commission-type roles. As such a role formed the nucleus of the original bill proposals, it would be difficult for the bill to progress without it.

Emma Roddick: On the matter of legislation potentially being brought forward if evidence suggests that it is required, does the minister have any suggestions on what that evidence would look like? How will that be monitored in the short term?

Alison Thewliss: We will continue to look carefully at what we are doing just now, at what is effective and at what might need legislative action to achieve further change. We think that an awful lot can be achieved without legislation and that the absence of legislation should not be a barrier to that. However, we are not closing the door, should there be such a barrier in future. We will consider introducing legislation if that proves to be necessary.

We also want to back up our policies by making targeted investments where we believe that they will have the greatest impact. People want to have access to services, quicker support when they need it, greater understanding in public services and more consistent experiences across Scotland. The experiences that people shared, including those with lived experience, will continue to inform all our thinking and our work. Those views really matter and are valuable and precious to us. The engagement that we have undertaken has greatly strengthened our understanding of the challenges that many people continue to face in their day-to-day lives. Members such as Yi-pei Chou Turvey mentioned the challenges that people face in the justice system, and Heather Anderson spoke, in her typically thoughtful way, about the education system. Our conclusion is that practical and meaningful improvements can be delivered more effectively at this stage through targeted reform, investment and service improvement.

In her opening speech, the Minister for Mental Wellbeing, Public Health, Sport, Alcohol and Drugs outlined some of the large array of policies that we are pursuing and continuing to move forward with, a few of which I will highlight. We are prioritising access to vital facilities in our communities. Over two years, we are investing £13 million through our changing places toilets fund. We are also helping to ensure that the health and social care workforce has the knowledge and confidence to deliver high-quality services to people with learning disabilities. Public Services Delivery Scotland is delivering our national learning resources and workforce training. David Smith made the point that teachers do not receive training in this area. That is not the case. It is one of the pre-General Teaching Council for Scotland registration requirements that teachers have to have such training.

Daniel Johnson: Does the minister not recognise that, while that might be true, there is no requirement for continuous professional development there, and that that is one of the big issues with the teaching workforce?

Alison Thewliss: There are training resources available to teachers, and I would very much encourage them to take those up as part of their professional learning and development. They ought to be wanting to do that to deal with the children they have in front of them in their classrooms. It is incredibly important that they do so.

David Smith: *[Made a request to intervene.]*

Alison Thewliss: I am very conscious of the time; I want to reflect the remarks that other members have made.

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): We have time in hand if you want to take more interventions.

Alison Thewliss: With all due respect, Presiding Officer, you do not know how much paper I have in front of me.

I will also mention our plans on coming home, which is a £20 million investment, with the “Coming Home Action Plan” having been published jointly with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities in March. Its aim is to get people out of hospital and inappropriate out-of-area placements. Alex Cole-Hamilton gave some very moving testimony on that, and I absolutely agree that we should be trying to get people out of those inappropriate places and back to their communities as soon as is practically possible. That fund has opened and has been taking and processing applications. It is starting to move, and the numbers on it are very much going in the right direction. I am really pleased to see that. It is a difficult thing to do, but we are absolutely committed to making it a reality for people.

Learning disability health checks are incredibly important to the learning disability community. They are crucial in picking up things that perhaps would not have been picked up otherwise within the healthcare system. I recently met Cher in Leith, and she told me very movingly what those health checks had meant for her health and wellbeing. I very much encourage people to take up that opportunity when it comes to them, and I encourage health boards to ensure that people get the checks that they are entitled to.

The rest of this Official Report will be published progressively as soon as the text is available.

Several members spoke about the extensive engagement that took place during the development of the proposed bill, about the voices that contributed to it, about the real-life experiences and trauma that was shared by those with lived experience, and about those who took the time to respond to consultation, to attend events and meetings and to share their life experiences with us. I completely understand that people and communities may feel let down by our decision not to progress the bill at this time.

I know that we now need to rebuild trust with those communities. We have heard that message from them directly, and we will do that through our actions, through continued engagement, through difficult and honest conversations and by continuing to listen to those in the LDAN community. We will ensure that their experiences are gathered and that they continue to have opportunities to be involved in the work of Government.

Miles Briggs: We are approaching decision time. If Parliament decides tonight that we want the reintroduction of the bill, will the minister and the Scottish Government actually respect the will of the Parliament?

Alison Thewliss: I am not sure if Miles Briggs heard me earlier; I said that we have not ruled that out—we have not ruled out a bill. I was very clear on that in my earlier remarks.

The voices that contributed so movingly and consistently to the LDAN bill have not been lost. The evidence gathered, the experiences shared and the relationships built continue to inform our work today, and they will do so in future. Stakeholders have been given clear assurances that their contribution would continue to influence future policy development, and that commitment will absolutely be honoured.

Ultimately, people are interested in whether their lives improve, whether support is available when it is needed, whether services are accessible, whether inequalities are reduced and whether opportunities increase. Those are the outcomes by which our actions should be judged.

The Scottish Government remains fully committed to improving outcomes for people with learning disabilities, autistic people and neurodivergent people. To be clear, while we have changed our approach and our position, our commitment to improve lives remains; our commitment to improve accountability and deliver practical improvements is the same. Our ambition to deliver and to improve lives is clearer than ever.

Adam Harley said in his opening speech that we must do better for people with learning disabilities, autism and neurodivergence. We are agreed on that, as a Parliament, this evening. I therefore ask the Parliament to support the Scottish Government amendment and to allow us to get on with that important work of supporting people.

17:19

Duncan Dunlop (South Scotland) (LD): In my heart, I am a youth and community worker, and central to that profession is how we enable those who are less seen or less heard to build trust in us, so that their needs are understood, they are able to participate and their voices effect change.

I have seen the power of that when it works in the Parliament. I have also seen what happens when we say that we have been listening but we then do not act—Katherine Sangster alluded to that. Trust is eroded, self-confidence is drained and hope ebbs away. Trust, hope and confidence are crucial to any person, but they are vital to one of the most misunderstood, least visible and therefore most excluded communities in Scotland.

I understand how much effort people with lived experience have poured into the past five years to develop the now dormant bill, at a personal cost. Not following through with the bill leaves them vulnerable and, as we have heard and as Adam Harley told us at the outset, it diminishes their life chances and life expectancy. Let us be clear: the Scottish Government is letting them down.

Indeed, this country has a dark history of failing the community. The Scottish child abuse inquiry has a wealth of evidence on the abuse and harm that children with learning disabilities, autistic children and those with neurodivergent conditions suffered while living locked up in Scottish institutions.

Historically, we have used legislation to make progressive changes. The Mental Health (Scotland) Act 1960 and the Chronically Sick and Disabled Persons (Scotland) Act 1972 were groundbreaking laws that revolutionised the way in which we viewed and cared for the community. In the main, those laws ended mass institutionalisation and provided practical support for people to live in their communities instead. Legislation is, and was, a powerful tool for a community that is not as visible as others to stand up for its rights but, since that time, there has been a lack of major intervention, despite the numerous rights breaches that continue to exist, which we heard about from Alex Cole-Hamilton.

The rest of this Official Report will be published progressively as soon as the text is available.

I was moved by Karen Adam's personal testimony about how those issues have affected her life and family. How good it was to hear that she found her community when she fought for and received a diagnosis.

I was struck by the humility of Joe Long's contribution. He has worked so hard and so long for people in the community, and I assume that he came to the chamber to ensure that their rights were realised. Let us hope that it is one small step backwards before we take many forward together.

Helen McDade was right that good intentions are not enough. We have seen too many empty promises. As Kayleigh Kinross-O'Neill, Miles Briggs and other members highlighted, we need aspects of the legislation to ensure that we realise the rights and needs of the community. I say to Heather Anderson that we need legislation. If there is no right to advocacy or to extend the provisions that are in place, people in the community will have no ability to hold the Government or services to account to ensure that their rights are realised.

Laura Moodie asked why we have wasted years in consultation. I am afraid that I have seen that too often. So many civil servants and others have told me that we do a consultation, consult for three to five years, and then a bill is cancelled. That is called shoving a difficult issue into the long grass.

I say to Emma Roddick that I hope that a bill will return to the Parliament within the next 12 months because, as Yi-pei Chou Turvey and Karen Adam highlighted, the prisons are full. How many prisoners are suffering from a learning disability or autism or are neurodivergent? We know that many of them have unclassified mental health issues.

It is the stories of those who we have heard from that really matter, whether they are adults or children. We have heard about workplaces that do not understand how lighting, seating and workstations can be inclusive in order to get the best from a mind that sees the world differently and finds vital solutions. Instead, non-adapted workplaces and well-intentioned but ignorant colleagues often lead to people experiencing symptoms of anxiety or to their talent and unique perspectives leaving work altogether. Members should note that the success of many of our high-value engineering and science-focused industries is based on an autistic and neurodiverse workforce.

As with many members, several families have approached me in despair about the lack of provision for their children. One family could not get support in schools in Aberdeenshire, and their child ended up in specialist provision in England. Two more families have struggled so badly that their children have not been to school for more than four years. Now those children are in their late teenage years, and their parents are fraught with worry about what will happen next.

The family of a seven-year-old autistic boy, Oran, spent several years struggling to find early learning childcare that could support him. He attended three different nurseries. His parents noted that the staff cared about him and tried their best but that the settings, staffing ratios and restrictions on training meant that his needs could not be met.

The Presiding Officer: Can you wind up, please?

Duncan Dunlop: Yes, certainly. Eventually, Oran's dad gave up his job to care for him before he went to a specialist school. Why must families fight so hard to secure the support that their children need to access education or have a career? Families should not have to fight for years, change their child's nursery time and again, quit their jobs or employ lawyers to secure the support that they need.

I am baffled by the minister's response today—I really truly am—

The Presiding Officer: You need to wind up, I am afraid. You are well over your time and it is unfair on other members when people take a lend of the chair like this. Come on. Wind up, please.

Duncan Dunlop: Okay. I believe that the minister cares, but our appeal to her today is to recognise her power and act. Please reintroduce the bill.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate on a learning disabilities, autism and neurodivergence bill.

Business Motion

17:25

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): The next item of business is consideration of business motion S7M-01754, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on a business programme.

Motion moved,

The rest of this Official Report will be published progressively as soon as the text is available.

That the Parliament agrees—

(a) the following programme of business—

Tuesday 3 November 2026

2.00 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by General Questions

followed by First Minister's Questions (Backbench Members)

followed by Ministerial Statement: Supporting Victims of Domestic Abuse: Taking Action to Support Those Affected by Council Tax Debt

followed by Scottish Government Debate: Supporting Young People to Participate in the Labour Market

followed by Motion on Legislative Consent: Sporting Events Bill - UK Legislation

followed by Committee Announcements

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.30 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 4 November 2026

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions: Climate Action and Rural Affairs; Education, Culture and Gaelic

followed by Reform UK Business

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.30 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 5 November 2026

1.30 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

1.30 pm General Questions

2.00 pm First Minister's Questions (Party Leaders)

followed by Ministerial Statement: Safeguarding and Protecting Children

followed by Scottish Government Debate: Strengthening Scotland's Bus Network

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Tuesday 10 November 2026

2.00 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by General Questions

followed by First Minister's Questions (Backbench Members)

followed by Scottish Government Business

followed by Committee Announcements

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.30 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

The rest of this Official Report will be published progressively as soon as the text is available.

Wednesday 11 November 2026

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions: Social Justice and Housing; Economy, Tourism and Transport

followed by Scottish Labour Party Business

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.30 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 12 November 2026

1.30 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

1.30 pm General Questions

2.00 pm First Minister's Questions (Party Leaders)

followed by Stage 1 Debate: Scottish Local Government Elections (Candidacy Rights of Commonwealth Citizens) Bill

followed by Scottish Government Business

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

(b) that, for the purposes of Portfolio Questions in the week beginning 2 November 2026, in rule 13.7.3, after the word "except" the words "to the extent to which the Presiding Officer considers that the questions are on the same or similar subject matter or" are inserted.—[*Jamie Hepburn*]

Motion agreed to.

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

17:26

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): The next item of business is consideration of nine Parliamentary Bureau motions. I call Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, to move motions S7M-01755 to S7M-01761, on approval of Scottish statutory instruments; S7M-01762, on approval of the Welfare of Equidae Code of Practice (Revocation) (Scotland) Notice 2026—I will be asking members at random to explain that to me—and S7M-01763, on designation of a lead committee.

Motions moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the Energy Performance of Buildings (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2026 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Employment Tribunals Extension of Jurisdiction (Amendment) (Scotland) Order 2026 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Provision of Early Learning and Childcare (Specified Children) (Scotland) Amendment Order 2026 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the First-tier Tribunal for Scotland (Transfer of Functions and Members of the Police Appeals Tribunal) Amendment Regulations 2026 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Representation of the People (Postal Voting for Local Government Elections) (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2026 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Scottish Local Government Elections (Election Agents, Expenses and Publication of Information) Amendment Order 2026 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Mental Health (Care and Treatment) (Scotland) Act 2003 Remedial Order 2026 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Welfare of Equidae Code of Practice (Revocation) (Scotland) Notice 2026 (SG/2026/193) be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Economy, Tourism and Energy Committee be designated as the lead committee in consideration of the third supplementary legislative consent memorandum on the Sporting Events Bill.

The rest of this Official Report will be published progressively as soon as the text is available.

The Presiding Officer: The questions on the motions will be put at decision time.

Motion without Notice

17:27

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): I am minded to accept a motion without notice under rule 11.2.4 of standing orders, that decision time be brought forward to now. I invite a member of the Parliamentary Bureau, which includes the Minister for Parliamentary Business, to move such a motion.

Motion moved,

That, under Rule 11.2.4, Decision Time be brought forward to 5.27pm.—[*Jamie Hepburn*]

Motion agreed to.

Decision Time

17:27

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): There are five questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that amendment S7M-01739.2, in the name of Maree Todd, which seeks to amend motion S7M-01739, in the name of Adam Harley, on a learning disabilities, autism and neurodivergence bill, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

We will have a short suspension to allow members to access the digital voting system.

17:28

Meeting suspended.

The rest of this Official Report will be published progressively as soon as the text is available.