



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Public Audit Committee

Wednesday 5 November 2025

Session 6



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PUBLIC AUDIT COMMITTEE

29th Meeting 2025, Session 6

CONVENER

*Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (LD)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)

*Joe FitzPatrick (Dundee City West) (SNP)

*Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Reform)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Stephen Boyle (Auditor General for Scotland)

Andrew Burns (Accounts Commission)

Edel Harris OBE (Independent Review of Adult Disability Payment)

Mark MacPherson (Audit Scotland)

Claire Tennyson (Audit Scotland)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Katrina Venters

LOCATION

The Sir Alexander Fleming Room (CR3)

Scottish Parliament

Public Audit Committee

Wednesday 5 November 2025

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:30]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Richard Leonard): Good morning. I welcome everyone to the 29th meeting in 2025 of the Public Audit Committee.

Agenda item 1 is a decision for members of the committee on whether to take agenda items 4, 5, 6 and 7 in private. Do we agree to take those items in private?

Members *indicated agreement.*

“Improving care experience: Delivering The Promise”

09:30

The Convener: Our second agenda item is consideration of the Audit Scotland report “Improving care experience: Delivering The Promise”. I am very pleased to welcome to the committee Stephen Boyle, the Auditor General. He is joined by Mark MacPherson, who is an audit director, and Claire Tennyson, who is an audit manager, both at Audit Scotland. We are also joined by Andrew Burns, who is the deputy chair of the Accounts Commission, because the report that we are considering has been produced jointly by Audit Scotland and the Accounts Commission. Andrew Burns, you are very welcome.

I will start the proceedings by inviting the Auditor General to make a short opening statement, and then we will get to our questions.

Stephen Boyle (Auditor General for Scotland): A very good morning to the committee. As you mentioned, convener, today’s session is on our joint report with the Accounts Commission on delivering the Promise.

As members might recall, in February 2020 a commitment known as the Promise was made to Scotland’s children, young people and adults with care experience to transform the care system within a 10-year period. Our report looks at the foundations for delivery of the Promise and how those have supported change so far. It does not look at detailed progress in individual areas, but, where relevant, we have highlighted the work and reporting that others have done on the subject.

The commitment of individuals and organisations to deliver the Promise remains strong across the public and third sectors, but our report found that initial planning about how it would be delivered did not provide a strong platform for success. Therefore, if the Promise is to be delivered, greater pace and momentum will be needed in the years up to 2030.

In 2024, nearly 12,000 children and young people were formally recorded as having spent time in care, with many more people, including care-experienced adults, having been in receipt of services at some point in their lives. Of course, behind every statistic is a person passing through the care system. As our report highlights, their experiences should be at the heart of any interpretation of success.

The Scottish Government’s vision is that all children and young people will grow up feeling “loved, safe and respected” and that they can realise their full potential. Our report underlines

that the Scottish Government and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities did not adequately plan how that vision would be achieved or measured. In December 2024, a delayed Promise progress framework was published, which was developed by a partnership of the Scottish Government, COSLA and The Promise Scotland. That was, of course, welcome, but in its current form the framework does not yet capture whether care-experienced people feel the impact of change and whether their lives are getting better. That will be a crucial next step.

Our report also found that, among multiple layers of governance, demonstrating collective accountability for the Promise remains challenging. New entities have been established to support delivery and oversight of the Promise, but we consider that there has been a lack of clarity about their roles and responsibilities. Those tasked with planning have sought to take a different approach, but having national plans will require producing further detail for individual sectors on how the Promise will be delivered.

Our report found that the Scottish Government has not yet assessed the skills or resources needed to deliver the Promise by 2030, which we see as “a significant delivery risk”. The workforce remains dedicated to improving the lives of care-experienced people, but significant challenges around recruitment, retention and staff wellbeing remain prominent.

The Scottish Government and COSLA must work with their partners to identify where resources need to be targeted in order to deliver on their objectives. We welcome the development of key pieces of work that are due by the end of next month, including the next iteration of the Promise progress framework and the plan 2024-30 route maps that will support it. The content of those documents and how they are used will be crucial in determining how much can be delivered by 2030.

Convener, as ever, the four of us will do our utmost to answer the committee’s questions.

The Convener: Thank you very much indeed. I will begin by looking at the governance and accountability arrangements. Your report draws attention to the extremely complex governance arrangements that are in place surrounding the Promise. I think that you used the expression “challenging” and said that the attempts so far to address that complex governance landscape have been—again, I will use your word—“insufficient”. Could you expand on that a little bit and give us your understanding of what those governance arrangements are, how they have come about, and what needs to be done to address them?

Stephen Boyle: I will be very happy to start, convener, and I will certainly turn to my colleagues should they wish to come in.

Key message 3 in our report sets out our overall thinking and judgment about governance. Many organisations are tasked with delivering the Promise. I refer to exhibit 1 on page 9 of the report, which draws on the work of the oversight board and illustrates pictorially how many organisations are involved in the overall landscape of delivering the Promise. By its very nature, it is complicated—there is no question about that.

I will turn first to the governance aspect. Our report said that there is

“a lack of clarity about ... roles and responsibilities”

in aspects of the decision-making framework. Many organisations are tasked with delivery but also have oversight and supporting contributory roles. We said that the situation remains confusing and not geared up to support the necessary collective responsibility and accountability.

To illustrate the point, and in case it is helpful, I refer to exhibit 3 on page 16 of the report, where we highlight the key organisations involved in the process and their respective roles and responsibilities. As we have reported through many parts of our work, governance matters. It is important that accountability is clear and that roles and responsibilities are clear, too.

The sense of our report is that there should be consideration of whether the totality of those arrangements is delivering to best effect. We make recommendations on consideration and clarification of the roles and responsibilities of the Scottish Government, COSLA and The Promise Scotland on how governance will work to best effect over the next five years to support delivery of the objectives that were set out when the Promise was supported back in 2000.

I will pause there, because I think that Andrew Burns wants to come in, and then perhaps Mark MacPherson or Claire Tennyson could do so if they wish to add anything.

Andrew Burns (Accounts Commission): I thank Stephen Boyle for passing over to me. I will try to amplify some of what he said from a local perspective, to illustrate the complexity of the situation.

Just before the exhibit to which the Auditor General drew our attention—which was exhibit 3 on page 16—I note that, on page 15, there is a little bit of text, in paragraph 17, about the role of children’s services planning partnerships at a local level. They are the delivery bodies that are represented and given voice by the Scottish Government together with the other corporate

parents who are tasked with implementing the changes within the Promise.

Claire Tennyson and Mark MacPherson might want to come in to expand on this. It is clear from the work that Audit Scotland officers have done that although all 30 CSPPs have delivery plans that mention the Promise, only 15 of them have the Promise as a priority. Those CSPPs report to community planning partnerships, which include a mixture of elected members and other local authority bodies. Even without the overarching architecture of the Promise, I know from experience—and, as I look around the room, I expect that members will also know this from their own experiences—that identifying responsibility and accountability at local level through community planning partnerships can be confusing at times.

To emphasise the Auditor General's point, the lack of clarity and lack of emphasis on accountability weave their way right through local government to national Government. I hope that none of that comes across as saying that there is a lack of commitment to delivery of the Promise. Right across the process, there is complete buy-in to delivery of its objectives, as the Auditor General said. However, as I mentioned, there is a lack of clarity around roles and responsibilities that weaves its way from the local level to the national one.

The Convener: It is mentioned in the report, is it not, that there can be quite a wide variation from local authority to local authority? What is done to promote good practice? How much networking is there to elevate those examples where things have gone well and where there have been more successful interventions and outcomes compared with those in other areas where there appears to have been fairly minimal activity?

Andrew Burns: I am happy to come back on that, and my colleagues might want to expand on it.

That is a good point, convener. As the Auditor General referenced in his opening comments, plan 2024-30 and the draft route maps that are supposed to be published by the end of this year—now a matter of only weeks away—will potentially provide a good way for CSPPs and other bodies to give evidence about what they are doing to deliver on the aspirations of the Promise.

Our final recommendation, on page 7 of the report, makes a point of recommending that CSPPs pick up on those route maps in delivery of the local plans that I just referenced. That echoes the point that you just made in your question, convener, that although all 30 partnerships reference the Promise in their plans, only 15—half of them—have it as a priority. That could be

improved by use of the soon-to-be-published route maps within the context of the 2024-30 delivery plan. We recommend that all CSPPs look at that carefully and do so within the next 12 months.

I do not know whether my colleagues want to come in and expand on that.

Stephen Boyle: I will start, and then Claire Tennyson and Mark MacPherson might want to come in.

We also found that the role of some sectors is much clearer than those of others. Andrew Burns mentioned the principle that the public sector is signed up to delivering the Promise. Our audit work did not find any debate or dissent about people wishing that Scotland's care system would deliver better outcomes for people with care experience. The roles and responsibilities of some sectors are more closely mapped to the contributions that they can make—in particular, local authorities, social work departments and education departments. However, the role of delivering the Promise is not confined to local authorities; it extends across the public sector.

We found that in some areas, including housing services and particularly the national health service, it was less clear how those roles would contribute to better outcomes. I draw members' attention to paragraph 31 of our report, which makes the point that, in October 2024, a Promise NHS network was established. However, that perhaps speaks to our wider point about the pace of progress—that is, four years or so after the commitment to deliver the Promise—and, again, it echoes much of the narrative around the need for the system to change and evolve.

Effectively, this system is a hallmark of public service reform—aiming to do things differently and potentially spend money differently—and that has been part of much of the work of the independent strategic adviser on the Promise. However, it is also illustrative that there is a lack of clarity on what people need to do.

Much is still to come. We understand that, by the end of this year, as Andrew Burns referenced, there will be route maps to provide clarity across multiple organisations about who can contribute best and where they can do so. Therefore, there will be important next steps to try to recover momentum in the years to come.

If you are content with that, convener, I am keen to bring in Claire Tennyson and then Mark MacPherson.

Claire Tennyson (Audit Scotland): Good morning. To touch on some of points that have been mentioned already, in exhibit 3 in the report we capture the main governance groups for the Promise that have been newly set up, which cover

oversight, policy planning, support and delivery. Those are the main groups that exist for the Promise specifically. Later in part 1 of the report, we note that at least 40 groups have either a direct or an indirect role in delivering the Promise, and those are spread across more specific policy areas or broader themes including equalities and human rights. The Promise inherently touches on many different aspects of a person's life, through various services that reflect its complexity.

09:45

On sharing of learning and good practice, we found that there are opportunities for bodies to do that. In exhibit 3, under the heading "Policy, planning and support", we refer to children's services planning partnerships. There is a strategic leads network for children's services planning partnerships and a local government programme board, both of which bring together professionals from those sectors and provide opportunities for sharing learning.

More broadly, on work to address governance, at paragraph 38 of the report we note that The Promise Scotland has carried out work to improve and simplify the governance and accountability landscape. That was published last year, and there is still work to do to implement it.

Mark MacPherson (Audit Scotland): I will try to be brief. It is worth starting by saying that the Promise is a national commitment. People across the country have bought into it, but it is heavily reliant on delivery at local level. COSLA has published annual reports on the activity that is happening in local areas. Earlier this year, The Promise Scotland published a local perspectives output that gave another indication of the extent of those activities. However, one issue is that not all of that information is synthesised effectively so as to provide a national picture. Again, the national commitment is the key element here.

As others have mentioned, we have seen evidence of the development of the Promise progress framework, the Promise story of progress and the route maps that are under way. All that activity has taken place in the past 12 to 18 months, but the Promise was made in 2020. As the Auditor General has referenced, there is a need for greater pace if its delivery is to be successful by 2030.

The Convener: Thank you. I note that one of your recommendations calls on the Scottish Government, with support from The Promise Scotland, to complete within the next six months—so there is an urgency to this—work to

"review and identify opportunities to streamline the remit, status, and expected impact of governance groups, boards and forums linked to The Promise",

so you have clearly identified that as requiring urgent attention.

Stephen Boyle: Yes, indeed. As I mentioned a moment or two ago, we think that governance matters, but in coming to a view we should always challenge ourselves by asking whether every step is necessary for delivering it effectively and that we should aim to strike the right balance. The current system is very complex. It might be leaping too far, but the challenge that we wanted to make to the Government, COSLA and The Promise Scotland was to ask: is the system helping delivery of the Promise, or is there a risk that, in itself, it becomes a barrier by presenting too many steps and layers and not necessarily having the clarity to support the momentum and the pace that will be needed between now and 2030?

The Convener: Graham Simpson will come in with some questions on that area shortly. I have one more question to ask before I bring him in—it is on a related area, but it looks at it from a slightly different angle.

In paragraph 20 of the report, you make the point that many of The Promise Scotland's aims are to support longer-term change. On the other hand, the nature of these things is that there are often short-term projects and short-term imperatives. You identify that as a risk. The question that we, as the Public Audit Committee, have is, how is that risk being managed? Do you think that there is a danger of some of those longer-term structural changes, which are intended to be delivered by, at the outside, 2030, which is less than five years away, may be blown off course by shorter-term imperatives?

Stephen Boyle: That risk is undeniable. There are many steps to go through between now and 2030. As ever, short-term changes really matter. The cumulative impact of those can lead to some of the system-wide change that was identified following the independent care review and the commitment to deliver the Promise.

Our sense is that it remains the case that there must be that close-level scrutiny, clarity around roles and responsibilities, and some of the other fundamentals, which I am sure we will talk about during the evidence session, such as monitoring and funding arrangements. We hope that our report is of use to all the people who remain committed to delivering the Promise.

You are right that it is about striking the right balance between the cumulative benefit of short-term changes and having clarity on the system-wide impact that will come by the end of the decade.

The Convener: Okay. Thank you. I now invite Graham Simpson to put some questions to you.

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Reform): Auditor General, when I was reading your report and reading up on the Promise, it was not quite clear in my mind what the Promise is. Are you clear on what it means?

Stephen Boyle: The Parliament and service users, recipients of services and people who have gone through Scotland's care system were clear that they wanted to produce a better outcome for care-experienced people.

If we go back to the independent care review at the end of the previous decade, it was said that the care system was not producing the life chances and outcomes that people wanted. As colleagues have mentioned, that led to a universal recognition that Scotland wanted to keep the Promise. I mentioned in my opening remarks the people who experienced the care system in all its forms. There is a complex array of language; I maybe ought to have said in my introductory remarks that language really matters in this report and can be sensitive and triggering—I am conscious of that.

In today's report, we have sought to take stock of progress towards delivering the Promise by 2030. Where are we with the governance arrangements and the measurement framework? Is spending to deliver the Promise, across all its objectives, on track?

I will bring in colleagues, but one point that I want to make before doing so, Mr Simpson, is about the measurement framework for the delivery of the Promise. That was not produced—

Graham Simpson: I will come to that. Not everyone has to answer the question.

Stephen Boyle: I appreciate that.

Graham Simpson: My next question is, if our starting point is that the care system needs to be improved and we will—I will put it this way—promise to improve it, that is the Promise. What do we mean by that? How do we measure that? What constitutes meeting the Promise to improve the care system by 2030? When we get to 2030, what needs to have happened?

Stephen Boyle: That goes to the heart of what we have sought to draw out in today's report. On the issue of clarity, the objectives for delivery of the Promise can mean different things to different people. However, ultimately, that is rooted in the experience of individuals and whether they think that they have received better outcomes and—the language here really matters—that people

“grow up feeling loved, safe, and respected”

and able to realise their

“full potential.”

In today's report, we offer examples of the impact of change. The change to the detention of 16 and 17-year-olds within the prison estate is cited as one of the impacts of change as a result of the Promise. Also, fewer people are in residential care.

However, it is complex, Mr Simpson. It is right to recognise that some of the indicators show change and success, but they are not necessarily able to translate entirely into whether the action taken was the right thing for people. Again, that goes back to the voices of people who are care experienced. It will perhaps be most important to hear from them and whether they believe that the system has changed appropriately from where it might have been in earlier periods in history.

If you are content, Andrew Burns would also like to come in on this point.

Graham Simpson: Okay.

Andrew Burns: I will comment briefly. The very fact that you have to ask that question illustrates what part of the problem is here. I absolutely agree with everything the Auditor General has just said about the centrality of care-experienced voices in all this, and it is important to keep that in mind throughout our discussions this morning.

Paragraphs 1 to 4 of the opening section of our report try to say exactly what the Promise is, but it is complicated. It is complex, and it is broken across a whole host of Government bodies that we have already alluded to in the last 10 or 15 minutes, and accountability is not clear.

The very fact that you ask that question illustrates part of the issue that the Audit Scotland report is flagging up. I know that we will probably come on to this, but, just in case we do not, it is crucial to say that the Audit Scotland and Accounts Commission report is not saying anything different from what the oversight board has said in some of its latter reports. I make that point to reinforce that there is commonality with regard to some of the messages that people who are auditing or overseeing this work are picking up on: the lack of clarity, accountability and clear sight lines of who is responsible for what.

Graham Simpson: You are right—it is complicated. It struck me that we could get to 2030 and some parts of the system will have improved. Some people going through the system will say that they have had a good experience and others will not say that. Therefore, when we get to 2030, it will be very difficult to say whether the Promise, whatever that means to you, has been delivered. I am just making that point.

However, what the Promise means, whatever that is, seems to be confusing for the various bodies that are tasked with delivering the Promise.

It comes out in your report that it seems to mean different things to different people or different bodies. Is that a fair summary?

Stephen Boyle: It is. I made a similar point in my previous answer. The start of section 2 of our report on page 24—the sub-heading—emphasises that

“From the outset, the Scottish Government did not adequately plan how it would define, measure and monitor progress.”

You will have seen, Mr Simpson, that we produce reports from time to time that make a similar point about implementation being most likely guaranteed when those steps are in place.

I would recognise that the ambitions of the Promise are so wide ranging and complicated that there is some mitigation because of the complexity, but, nonetheless, given where we are now with regard to the timescales, there is a need to build upon the Promise progress framework, which was published last year. We have talked once or twice this morning about creating planned route maps to give clarity to people who work in the sectors on delivery—that is, what people need to do. There is synergy there. People want to do well. They want to deliver the Promise, but they need help from Government, COSLA and The Promise Scotland to do so.

Graham Simpson: They have to know what it is that they are meant to be doing. Is the issue that the bodies do not actually know what they are meant to be doing to deliver on the commitment?

Stephen Boyle: You have heard already from Andrew Burns the evidence on the children’s services planning partnerships, which are the entities that bring together the key players in delivering the Promise. Notwithstanding the point about only around half of those having delivering the Promise as a strategic priority, if those organisations, the organisations that they represent and the people around those tables do have not clarity, it will be harder to evidence and deliver the Promise over the remaining years.

Andrew, do you want to say more on that?

Andrew Burns: I just want to agree that there is a lack of uniformity in the understanding and reporting of, and the priority that is given to, delivery at a local level. I know that we are in danger already of repeating ourselves, but that is why the route maps, which we have referenced several times already, are a crucial part of the 2024-30 plan.

As the Auditor General and Mark MacPherson said earlier, all that has been instigated in the past 12 to 18 months is very welcome, but it would be more effective if it had been there right at the outset, when the independent care review’s

recommendations were made and the Promise was adopted. However, it is very positive that the route maps that are part of the 2024-30 plan are now coming forward by the end of this year, as I think I said earlier.

10:00

Graham Simpson: Yes, you did.

We have mentioned the oversight board, and we had correspondence from the chair of the oversight board, David Anderson. I will read a couple of excerpts from that, and I will ask you to tell me what you think. He said:

“Progress to deliver The Promise has been too slow, accountability remains unclear, and planning across government and partners has not been coordinated in a way that gives confidence that – given we are at the halfway mark – enough meaningful change is being achieved.”

I assume from your report that you agree with that.

Stephen Boyle: Yes, I do. There are parallels to what Mr Anderson has said relative to what we have set out in our report.

Graham Simpson: Okay. Mr Anderson also said:

“Slow progress cannot be explained by complexity alone”—

we have heard that it is complex. He continued:

“It reflects the absence of timely decision-making and clear ownership within Government. When leadership hesitates, systems drift. The barrier is often not process but people. We have seen decisions delayed, accountability avoided, and the urgency of lived experience overlooked.”

That is pretty strong stuff. What is your comment on that?

Stephen Boyle: Those are clear views from the chair of the oversight board. Recognising the consistency of those views with what we have set out in today’s report, we hope that our recommendations are helpful in addressing some of the need for pace and momentum in the years to come. Roles and responsibilities, governance, progress monitoring, how finance is organised and workforce are all relevant factors when it comes to delivering the Promise.

However, as ever, collective leadership is at the heart of that. There is an opportunity here, because it is rare that there is such universal commitment. We do not say that in all our reports. People want to deliver on the national outcome of keeping the Promise. The language used is that that is an objective, but there are steps that are needed to mitigate the delivery risk that we refer to in the report.

Graham Simpson: Okay. I will put a final point to you. As I just read out to you, Mr Anderson said that

“the barrier is often not process but people”.

Who do you think he is referring to? He also said:

“We have seen decisions delayed, accountability avoided, and the urgency of lived experience overlooked.”

That suggests to me that there is systemic failure. However, the comment about the barrier being “people not process” is particularly strong. It suggests that there are people in the system who are not doing what they should be doing.

Stephen Boyle: You would probably expect me to say that it is hard for me to second-guess what or who Mr Anderson was referring to. I am sure that he is best placed to speak for himself rather than have me overinterpret his commentary.

Today, we—Audit Scotland, the Accounts Commission and me—have sought to provide a stocktake of the delivery of the commitment to the Promise, which is a national priority. At the heart of that is people’s experience of public services, together with significant amounts of public spending that are designed to improve outcomes, and whether that could be done better.

Graham Simpson: Thank you. It is back to you, convener.

The Convener: Thank you very much, Graham. I now invite Colin Beattie to put some questions to our witnesses.

Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): Good morning, Auditor General. I have a couple of areas that I would like to explore. You have touched on the question of care-experienced people and their input, but page 22 of your report says:

“There are examples of engagement with care experienced people, but it is not always clear how their voice is being systematically embedded in service design or delivery”.

Can you comment on that?

Stephen Boyle: As you can see, the report includes excerpts of some of the direct contributions that people made during the audit fieldwork. Claire Tennyson might want to touch on some of that, particularly with regard to the role of champions boards, which is one of the governance mechanisms through which we can explore with care-experienced people whether the system is changing and whether it is working.

Claire Tennyson: As you mention, Mr Beattie, paragraph 39 talks about how the voices of children, young people and care-experienced adults are considered in service design. Broadly speaking, the evidence on that is mixed. We have

considered various strands of research, and I will highlight some examples.

The Auditor General mentioned the existence of champions boards, which allow children and young people in local areas the opportunity to express their views on specific matters concerning the Promise. I would add a caveat, which is that champions boards may take other forms, including local promise keepers and so on.

There are mixed findings from the engagement that has come through the champions boards. Some people report examples of feeling seen and heard; others talk about times when their desire for certain outcomes or services is overruled because of issues with resources or the fact that they might not be able to sustain relationships with the workforce due to recruitment barriers and so on.

We have also considered other national research from the Care Inspectorate, which has looked at transitions for children and young people moving on from care. That was an area in which, as we highlight, destinations can often be dictated by resources.

There are certainly various areas where young people’s voices are being sought and incorporated, but there can be issues with how that is then taken forward.

The Scottish Government has carried out four consultations, in relation to which it commissioned support from Barnardo’s and Who Cares? Scotland, and it has fed into the bill that is being considered at the moment. That is another example of where the Scottish Government is working to understand the views of young people.

Broadly speaking, there is a mixed picture. It goes back to that issue of the Promise being very broad and people’s experiences depending on the specific area or service. People report different things and, again, different individuals have different experiences. Each person’s experience is subjective.

Colin Beattie: You seem to be saying that the approach is a bit random and that there is not a systematic method of engagement on service delivery and service design. Is that correct?

Claire Tennyson: Different organisations, of which there are many, have their own approaches to engaging with people with care experience—that is one layer. However, at a national level, how the Promise progress framework is presented does not capture the experiences and outcomes for care-experienced people. The next iteration of that is due in December this year and will seek to assess whether care-experienced people are feeling the impact of change. That will address the

more national, collective piece with regard to how people feel that their lives are improving.

I come back to the point that there are many different organisations, sectors and services, and they all have their own routes into engaging with people.

Colin Beattie: What we are referring to here is the national picture as opposed to the ground-level approach. However, we do not know what those local institutions are doing around reaching out to care-experienced young people. Do we assume that it is happening, or do we have evidence that it is happening?

Claire Tennyson: Corporate parents report on how they are supporting care-experienced people at an organisation level, and they will include that information in their individual reporting.

Mark MacPherson: Action is going on locally to engage with young people, and you are right to say that there is a need to get a picture of how that is working across the whole country. Claire Tennyson has quite rightly referenced that the next iteration of the Promise progress framework is important, and, in paragraph 60, we note that, five years on, it is overdue, which presents

“a significant risk to understanding progress.”

Getting young people’s views and understanding how the changes that have taken place so far are affecting them is the critical bit that is missing at the moment. That is why we emphasise the need for that work to be completed.

Colin Beattie: I will move on to another area that you will not be unfamiliar with: data collection. I do not know how many times this committee has talked about the lack of data and the anomalies within the data collection system.

Page 4 of the report says:

“Available data is not sufficient to assess if services are improving the lives of care-experienced people at a national level, but improvements are under way to enable long-standing data barriers to be addressed.”

The first question is, what are the data barriers that are being addressed? Given the fact that data collection has been in front of the committee for ever and has always been commented on, why is the Government not learning from previous deficiencies?

Stephen Boyle: You are right to say that, when presenting our audit reports to the committee, we have discussed the importance of data collection and the use of data information-sharing arrangements many times. I will ask my colleagues to say a bit more about some of the specifics, but first I will say that information-sharing arrangements remain an issue, as people with care experience are still being asked the

same questions over and over again by various organisations.

In paragraph 50 and the subsequent paragraphs, we note that the Scottish Government and its partners recognise that that situation needs to improve. There is an example there of the exploration of data linkage, with progress being tracked through the use of early school records that can stay with people. Using data in that way provides a more consistent identifier and prevents organisations having to ask the same questions over and over again. We also note some of the steps that the Government has taken through workshops and groups to establish how it can tackle the issue.

On a more negative point, the importance of good data is a familiar issue not only to this committee but to Government, and we might say that the issue ought to have been anticipated at an earlier stage. However, we are now keen to see that there is momentum behind what is being done and that good data tracking, monitoring and evaluation are accelerated and are at the heart of this ambition over the next five years.

Claire Tennyson or Mark MacPherson might want to add to that.

Claire Tennyson: Paragraph 49 references specific examples of work that is under way to improve data. More broadly, I would say that improvements to data infrastructure take time. That work cannot be addressed really quickly. That goes back to the point about the planning for the Promise and how progress would be measured.

On other work that is under way to address data issues, the next iteration of the Promise progress framework is due at the end of this year, as I said, and will capture the next two levels of the framework, examining whether care-experienced people are feeling the impact of change and what the situation is with regard to organisation-level data. I understand that that work is being supported by a data and evidence group in the Scottish Government, which published a work plan towards the end of our audit work—in August, I believe—that set out at a high level some of the projects that will support the various workstreams.

Certainly, as we set out in the report, the completion of the overarching framework is a crucial next step.

Colin Beattie: I sometimes despair of the terminology that is used in some of these reports. On page 27, you refer to “longitudinal research and data triage”. Could I have that in English, perhaps?

10:15

Stephen Boyle: Far be it from me to correct you, Mr Beattie, but we refer to “data linkage”, not triage.

Forgive me if we have used some of the terminology that is prevalent in discussions among those who work in the system. Particularly in this context, clarity of language really matters.

Data linkage means simply that the data follows the person from organisation to organisation over the course of their use of public services in this context. The point that we are trying to convey is that work is under way to address the long-standing issue that data has not been strong enough to support some of the interventions and decision making that is necessary with such a system. Claire Tennyson can add to that.

Colin Beattie: When you do, Claire, could you comment on whether the work that is being done is sufficient to assess services and ensure that improvements are actually taking place?

Claire Tennyson: The Auditor General has set out the work around data linkage. At the moment, the data concerning care-experienced people is primarily administrative data that looks at a child or an adult at a point in time rather than mapping a person’s journey through health, education, social work, the justice setting and so on. What has come out through our audit work is that a lot of information is held on care-experienced people in Scotland, and we should ensure that it is used in a meaningful way.

On action to address those barriers, we have highlighted some work that is under way but, as I said, it will take time for the changes to embed. The Promise progress framework has taken a while to come into place, as it was established only last year and then required further development, so we recognise that there has been a delay there.

Colin Beattie: In paragraph 55, the report says:

“The Promise Scotland is leading the work to support improved data collection but that progress has been slower than planned.”

I think that that relates to two projects to support better use of data and identify resolutions to data sharing. Can you say a bit more about the work that The Promise Scotland is doing in connection with that? How is it supporting improved data and why is progress slower than anticipated?

Stephen Boyle: Claire Tennyson can come in on some of the detail of the two projects. I will echo the language that Claire Tennyson referenced: it is complex. There are multiple systems that will capture people’s experience of traversing through the care system in the earlier stages of their life, whether it is education, social

work, housing, health systems and so forth. Bringing all that together is complicated. You could take a view on whether the complexity that has been exposed would have been known in advance and whether that is appropriate mitigation for some of the time that it has taken. That is probably more a matter for the different parts of the system and The Promise Scotland to express a view on. What we are pleased to see is that there is work under way.

To go back to some of our earlier comments, Mr Beattie, the timing and momentum really matter now to support delivery over the next five years. Claire Tennyson might want to say a bit more about the information-sharing project and then about the data map that the Promise is developing.

Claire Tennyson: We have already touched on the challenges around information sharing. The information-sharing project, which is being led by The Promise Scotland in collaboration with the Scottish Government, launched last year and is expected to publish next month, in December 2025. It is looking at how to address key barriers in information sharing across thematic areas around legal, cultural and technical issues. It is looking at culture around leadership, data sharing and practice in relation to risk in data sharing.

The second project that we mention, the Promise data map, has been on-going for a bit longer. It is one of The Promise Scotland’s earlier projects from when it was established. We are not entirely clear what that will look like. It has been delayed because the project has evolved from its initial purpose. The initial assumption was that it would allow organisations to know what data they collected and map that across Scotland, but the project is now going to focus more on a quality improvement tool. It has been tested in South Ayrshire with some positive feedback. In practice, we have not seen what that tool will look like and how it will function. That is due for completion at the end of 2025.

Stephen Boyle: Andrew Burns wants to come in on this point as well.

Andrew Burns: I wanted to add that I think that Colin Beattie is right to flag up the importance of this issue. I hope that the answers from Claire Tennyson and others have illustrated that it has been taken very seriously in the report. You have referenced the fact that The Promise Scotland, as an entity, is leading on much of this. I just wanted to reference back to—I think that you referred to it in your opening comments, convener—recommendation 1 at the top of the report, which says:

“In the next six months, the Scottish Government and COSLA, with support from The Promise Scotland, should”—

and then there are four or five bullet points. The last bullet point is on this very specific issue about the co-ordination of data via the newly established data and evidence group.

I am reinforcing and—hopefully—making the point that we collectively hope that all the bodies that are referenced in recommendation 1 pick up on that promptly within the next six months and collate and codify the data in a much more uniform manner that makes the delivery of progress more understandable for members of the public and for those people who are scrutinising what is happening with the delivery of the Promise more globally.

The Convener: Thank you very much. I will now turn to Joe FitzPatrick to put some questions to you.

Joe FitzPatrick (Dundee City West) (SNP): Before I ask my questions on resources, I want to pick up on a point that was made during the contribution from my colleague Graham Simpson. He was talking about the complexity of understanding whether the Promise is being delivered. He also read the quote about the urgency of the lived experience, which made me think that it is difficult to know when we have got this right, but it is absolutely clear when we have got it wrong, isn't it?

When a care-experienced person's journey is not what it should be, are we putting the urgency on that to, first of all, fix that for that person in the context of the Promise? Are we looking at how we make sure that it does not happen to someone else? When I have come across a care-experienced person who has not had a great journey, the first thing that I have said to them is, "Thank you so much for speaking up, because it is not just about you; it is about all the other folk who are likely to be experiencing it because the system is not working as it should." Have we managed to join those dots?

Stephen Boyle: That is such an important contribution. It is the system that needs to change, rather than the individuals, in order to provide better outcomes for people's experience at the earlier stages of their life. It affects the totality of their life chances thereon. The learning that comes from that has to be reflected on the local level, through the different organisations that are working on this and then gathered up and shared by the Government, The Promise Scotland and COSLA. Ultimately, it was the intention that Scotland would produce a better system and ensure that people who are going through that system are—going back to the language, Mr FitzPatrick—loved, safe and respected to deliver their full potential. That is why this really matters, of course.

Andrew Burns: I will echo that. What you have asked about is at the heart of what this is all about. The Promise is about delivering on just that—giving voice to those care-experienced people and making sure that they are loved, safe and respected over the course of their journey through their time in care. If what comes out of the Audit Scotland and Accounts Commission report and the work from the oversight board that I have already referenced, which have very strong commonalities, helps the next stage of the delivery of the Promise—from 2025 to 2030—I think that that will be a very welcome step.

We have referenced this several times. There is not a lack of commitment, at all the different levels, to delivering on these aspirations. They are commendable aspirations, but we are collectively struggling to see delivery on the ground. Following through these recommendations and listening to what the oversight board has said in the three reports—particularly the last one, report 3—and acting on those recommendations would make a huge difference to the success of delivery by 2030.

Joe FitzPatrick: Thank you.

I will move on to resources. Key message 5 talks about the challenges of getting a clear assessment of what resources and skills are required. The report also talks about how local government spending has gone up and Scottish Government funding for the Promise has increased, but it highlights the challenges of understanding how that funding is being allocated. It is obviously complex to know where the money is going and how it is being spent. On page 32, you highlight the challenges that arise because of differences in local systems. If the children's services are part of the integration joint board, as you have suggested, it is more difficult to get clarity. We need to add to that the NHS's contribution. How do we understand how the money is managing to flow if we have all these different systems? While respecting that different areas will want to do things differently—that is important for local democracy—how can we get consistency of understanding how the money is spent, so that we can ensure that the funding that has been allocated is being used and we can monitor that?

Stephen Boyle: You are absolutely right, and we thought carefully about the language that we use around resources, because there are so many organisations involved in this. What we specifically refer to is identifying that the resources to deliver the Promise are targeted to deliver the objectives. That will not necessarily mean that the system will continue to function as intended. The independent strategic adviser has done analysis of some of this and—I am paraphrasing, Mr FitzPatrick—the

language is about changing how we spend money within the system, investing and then disinvesting in different places as the system evolves.

We make a recommendation that, over the next six months, the Scottish Government, COSLA and The Promise Scotland be clear on where resources will be spent to target delivery and to identify any gaps nationally and locally in funding, resources and skills to deliver on the Promise. That can be done while respecting that there will be different priorities in different areas.

Andrew Burns might want to say a bit more about the local component of that, recognising that there is complexity. There is no doubt about some of the structures of IJBs and children's service planning partnerships and how all that money is spent and collated, but we think that it is such a key next step that it is our primary recommendation in today's report.

Andrew Burns: It is about getting that balance right. As you and the Auditor General referenced, there is nothing wrong with diversity of approaches and diversity of funding. In many ways, that is to be welcomed at a local level—let a thousand flowers bloom and so on. However, to deliver a national programme, as I think Mark MacPherson and Claire Tennyson referenced, there needs to be some direction, so we need to get the balance between having national direction and allowing local flexibility. As the Auditor General has referenced, and as I think I said in response to the convener's questions, there is a very significant variation at the local level that could probably be improved on. That is certainly one of the strong recommendations in our report. It comes across in the work of the oversight board as well.

10:30

Without repeating what we have gone over, I note that only half of the children's services planning partnerships have the Promise as a priority, and how the whole family wellbeing fund has been expended has not been assessed in detail yet. It is early days, but just making progress on some of those elements would—hopefully—still allow local diversity but bring a national focus to a very important programme of delivery that, as the convener referenced right at the start, is less than five years away from potentially being achieved. That was the initial target: by the end of 2030.

Joe FitzPatrick: It is good that there are really short timescales for some of the targets. Identifying the children's services planning partnerships that do not have the Promise as a priority and making sure that they do is a responsibility for all of us on the committee. The Promise is not just about the Government, it is about all of society. As MSPs, we need to check

that our children's services are including the Promise as a priority, as it should be, and encourage them to do so if not.

Obviously, funding will always be a challenge. You mentioned that this is more than just about funding. Resources are wider than that. There are some suggestions of local partnerships where resources are redirected into more preventative spending so that the care experience can be improved without detriment to other parts of the system by changing the way we do things. Are there any examples that you would like to flag, particularly for folk listening in, of where that has happened and worked well? I guess that folk listening will be concerned that, if we are going to spend money here, that will be to the detriment of other areas. However, that is not always the case if we get it right. I know that it is not easy, so it would be good to hear where there are examples of good practice.

Stephen Boyle: I am very happy to start, and then my colleagues might want to come in with some of the detail of the particular areas across Scotland that we reference. Whether it is in Glasgow City Council, Perth and Kinross Council or elsewhere, we can set that out for the committee and anyone else watching today's session.

If I may, I will say a word or two first about prevention and system reform—I think that you referenced it yourself, Mr FitzPatrick—which is really what this is about. There are many strong examples of where spending differently—preventative spend—leads to better outcomes at a lower cost. Some of the analysis done by The Promise Scotland in following the money and looking at the multiple systems in place and how that money can be redirected to a preventative approach is at the heart of the ambitions of the Promise.

I will not steal colleagues' thunder. Claire, do you want to start?

Claire Tennyson: We reference two examples in part 3 of the report, at paragraphs 69 and 70. Perth and Kinross Council has had a programme of work since before the Promise, in 2019. That has supported people at high risk of being accommodated away from home and has kept them in the community. Similarly, Glasgow City Council has a long-standing programme to provide intensive support to vulnerable families. The service takes a different approach to how it approaches risk and involves families earlier to prevent crisis intervention.

More broadly, later in the report we talk about the whole family wellbeing fund. That is a core funding stream that has been set up to support early intervention and prevention. Although there

have been many challenges with that, from what we have heard through our work, key enablers for areas have included having strong existing infrastructure in terms of supporting data systems—we have talked this morning about data sharing between different services—and long-standing relationships with the third sector, which have been greatly valued for being able to deliver local supports. We refer to the importance and the value of the third sector later in the report. Those are just some of the key enablers.

Joe FitzPatrick: Where you see good practice, is that being shared? Are other areas looking at that, or are they saying, “That is Glasgow, so we are not going to do that”? Have they managed to break that down to put the folk that this is about at the heart of decision making?

Claire Tennyson: There are some good examples of sharing of learning. For the whole family wellbeing fund, which I referenced, the Scottish Government established a learning in action network that brings together local whole family wellbeing support leads for opportunities to discuss their projects, what is going well and the challenges. We thought that the approach around the sharing of learning has been robust in that respect. There are also some national progress reports—for example, COSLA reports—on work that is under way locally to share learnings. There are different forums for this.

Stephen Boyle: I referenced earlier some of the analysis of work that has been done on investment and disinvestment, led by the independent strategic adviser, with a focus on changing how money is spent to lead to better anticipated preventative outcomes. It may be worth also highlighting for the committee that those theories remain as such. As we note at paragraph 72, the Scottish Government has not yet signalled its intention to absorb that thinking and that work about the timing or pace of investment and disinvestment in systems. We are keen to see, through the response to the report, whether that will be part of the system of change. Will thinking about the multiple different ways in which spending contributes towards delivering the Promise be part of the response? We will continue to follow that after today’s report.

Joe FitzPatrick: Thank you. I think that other colleagues have more questions in this area, so I will leave it open.

The Convener: That is great, Joe—thank you very much. Yes, I invite the deputy convener, Jamie Greene, to put some questions to you on this and some other areas.

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (LD): Good morning. I will start with a fundamental question about the Promise as a concept. As is mentioned

in your report, the Scottish Government has a clear, well-known and well-defined policy of getting it right for every child, which is commonly referred to as GIRFEC. If every relevant public agency was getting it right for every child, would we need the Promise at all?

Stephen Boyle: It is hard to be definitive on that. There was probably a pragmatic sense that the outcomes for all children and young people going through Scotland’s care system—those who were care experienced—were not the ones that Scotland wanted for them. For those who had gone through the care system, there was a clear disparity in their life chances. That applies to GIRFEC and the roles of the multiple services involved—including NHS, housing, education and social work services—and it is the root of why the independent care review was commissioned. The adoption of that report not just by the Government but by the Parliament and other public bodies was about delivering better outcomes.

There was a recognition that the system and the legislation were not working as intended and that, therefore, intervention was needed. That was accompanied by the objective to deliver the Promise over this decade. It is quite reasonable to say, as you have done, that GIRFEC and the various strands of legislation that reference that objective and others were not working as intended, so people wanted to improve the system.

Jamie Greene: I ask that question because there is an interesting quote on page 22 of your report from an unnamed children’s services staff member, who, I assume, is trying to deliver the Promise. They are quoted as saying:

“does GIRFEC sit above The Promise or does The Promise provide a framework in which GIRFEC then sits?”

Do you have a view on the answer to that question?

Stephen Boyle: Through that quote and other parts of the report, we have sought to illustrate that there is a lack of clarity on what was intended. It is important that, within the next few weeks, “Plan 24-30”, which takes us to the end of the current timescales, sets out what is expected of individual organisations and the people who remain committed to delivering the Promise. That quote is, I hope, a good example of someone who wants to do their best not having the tools, the levers or the path to do that.

Jamie Greene: Does that strike you as unusual, given how far into the policy we are? The former First Minister made the Promise a high-profile commitment and gave it a top priority—rightly so—nearly six years ago, and we are less than four years away from the date by which the Promise should be completed. Your report from a few

weeks ago talks about a lack of clarity, a lack of accountability and a lack of following the money. Those issues have been highlighted in today's evidence session, and I will come back to them. Given how far we are into the delivery of the policy, that strikes me as unusual for something that has had such attention given to it.

Stephen Boyle: There has certainly been a lack of momentum to achieve the shared ambition to deliver the Promise. In our audit report, we have sought to explore some of the reasons for that, including the lack of clarity on roles and responsibilities. Everyone has signed up to the policy. Who would not sign up to delivering better outcomes for people going through Scotland's care system? However, people need to be given a route map for that. What is expected of individual organisations? Where will the money be spent? I spoke to Mr Beattie about the views of care-experienced people. How are they receiving the system? We need to capture their views of the system, not just those of the people who work in it or of those who oversee it and are charged with its governance.

As has been touched on a number of times, the system is complex, but we knew that the system was complicated. There needs to be clarity on the direction and on the measurement framework, there needs to be good-quality data, and the funding arrangements need to be resolved. You might want to touch on those issues further, but all those parts of the system need to evolve more quickly than they have done if the Promise is to be delivered over the next few years.

Jamie Greene: The system sure is complex. In relation to the workforce, which I will ask about in a moment, I was quite struck by exhibit 8, which shows that somebody who works in social care or the care sector faces 60 different—and sometimes competing—pieces of legislation and policies. That is a complex landscape for somebody on the front line, who might be dealing with very difficult situations, to navigate simply in order to do their day job. That is testament to those staff. That was a statement rather than a question for you, Auditor General.

You go into great detail on the whole family wellbeing fund. What is the situation? Four or five years ago, the Government announced a dedicated £500 million—£0.5 billion—to deliver the Promise. That is a substantial amount of money. You say that the Scottish Government “introduced”—that is your terminology—£0.5 billion. I do not know what “introduced” means. Does it mean that the Government spent, made available or delivered that money? In the next paragraph, you say that, to date, only £148 million of that funding has been committed in budgets or is visible in budgets, so there is £352 million that

has not been spent or simply does not exist. Do we know why that is the case?

Stephen Boyle: I will try to cover as many of those points as I can. In relation to the timeline, the fund was created in 2021-22—we put no particular emphasis on the word “introduced”—and there were three distinct elements across local government and national Government. The committee will be familiar with the various factors that are taken into account when money is allocated, including rurality and deprivation. The £500 million was to be spent over the parliamentary session and, as you highlighted and as we mention in the report, only £148 million has been spent to date. There will be decision points for the Parliament in relation to what happens to that commitment after the Scottish Parliament elections, which will be a factor.

10:45

One issue is the pace—why has the money not been spent as quickly as intended? Is the system not working as intended? Are there available recipients of the funding to support the fund's overall objectives? It is important to emphasise that, as we say above paragraph 86 in our report, the Government has a fairly robust approach to guidance, monitoring and the sharing of learning from the whole family wellbeing fund. At the right point, there will need to be an evaluation of whether the funding, in its totality, delivered as intended, but I suspect that that will now not happen before the end of this parliamentary session.

I will pause to see whether Claire Tennyson, Mark MacPherson or Andrew Burns wishes to say anything more on the issue.

Claire Tennyson: The Auditor General has set out the three elements that make up the whole family wellbeing fund. The fund was introduced in the 2021-22 programme for government and has been committed to since 2022-23.

Exhibit 7 shows that the most substantial proportion of the funding is for element 1, with the money being split between children's services planning partnerships and allocated via local authorities, in collaboration with partners. Through our audit work, we have heard that many local areas have had challenges in utilising the funding due to its being a short-term pot of money. That has led to challenges in filling posts in projects associated with the fund. In relation to existing infrastructure, which I mentioned earlier, there have been risks in areas where there are long-standing challenges with data sharing or where there are less developed connections with third sector partners, which are key.

Similarly, in relation to element 3 funding, there have been issues with the short-term nature of the funding and with finding locations to deliver the support.

As we reference in paragraph 85, the Scottish Government has set out its investment approach for distributing the remainder of the fund, but, as has been mentioned, the timeframe will go beyond the current parliamentary session.

Jamie Greene: It looks as though the lion's share of the funding goes on element 1. I am trying to get my head around what has happened. After the Government announced that money would be available, did the CSPPs not make bids for the money, were the bids rejected or was the money simply never made available to them in their block grants or through ring-fenced funding that they could spend? Did the Government never give CSPPs the cash, or was there no appetite for the money to be spent on specific projects? I know that such projects would need to have specific remits.

It is key that we understand what has happened, because we need to know where the fault lines are and why the money that was promised is not coming out of the system.

Claire Tennyson: The money was allocated to CSPPs via a funding formula that takes into account factors such as deprivation and rurality. The money went to CSPPs, but they have reported challenges in using the funding. As we reference, actual spending has also been lower, but the ability to roll the funding forward into future years, with local flexibility, has been valued.

Stephen Boyle: I also draw the committee's attention to paragraph 83. We have not been able to establish how the overall £500 million sum for the whole family wellbeing fund was arrived at. That is not to say that it is not the right figure, but, through our audit work, we got no real sense of the foundation for arriving at £500 million as the necessary amount to deliver the fund's three pillars.

Jamie Greene: I presume that those are questions for ministers, which we can rightly ask in our own way.

Stephen Boyle: Indeed.

Jamie Greene: We will do so. If that funding was for this session of Parliament, which ends in six months, there are no guarantees that the £350 million will be available to future Governments and Parliaments, which is a concern.

Linked to the issue of resource is that of people. The report is excellent in highlighting some of the challenges facing the workforce in social care and the care sector. Two statistics jump out at me as the most worrying, because we need people to

deliver the services. One is that there is a 10 per cent vacancy rate for social workers. I do not know whether that is good, bad or indifferent in the bigger picture of health and social care. More importantly, a similar proportion—13 per cent—of social workers are very likely to leave the job in the next 12 months. It is not that they will maybe leave or are considering it because they are a bit stressed or overworked. They have clearly been questioned by their employers, unions or third parties and have said that they are very likely to leave. We must assume that that is a fairly accurate figure.

Where did you get those numbers? How concerning are they?

Stephen Boyle: I will bring in the team to say more about the methodology, but I share your assessment that those issues are concerns for the profession, for Government and ultimately for delivery of the Promise. Therefore, some of the response to that, in relation to workforce planning and the pipeline of talent coming into the profession, is welcome. I note some of the steps that we set out in paragraph 93 that the Scottish Government and the Scottish Social Services Council are taking to encourage people to enter the profession. Those include graduate apprenticeships and revisions to the training framework, which might go some way to addressing the issue. However, it is clearly a matter of significance.

The social work profession matters, but the delivery of the Promise is a key role for people who are not professionals in the system, whether it is kinship carers or fostering services. In exhibit 8, we draw out some statistics on the challenges that those people are experiencing, and the team can say a bit more about those. For example, 49 per cent of foster carers reference that they experience burnout or poor wellbeing. There are absolutely challenges in the system.

I will again reference the recommendation in the report that resources—financial and workforce—should absolutely be targeted where that can make the most significant impact over the next five years.

Claire Tennyson might want to say a bit more about some of the methodology that we adopted in this part of the report.

Claire Tennyson: The statistics referenced in exhibit 8 are drawn from a range of sources. The one that you mentioned, on wellbeing, is from the Scottish Social Services Council report on wellbeing. The SSSC reports a lot of wider data for the social work profession. More broadly, the exhibit uses information from the Fostering Network, which is an independent organisation, as

well as from the Scottish Government. The statistics come from different sources.

Jamie Greene: They are very concerning. I would be concerned about any public sector area where four in 10 people felt unsafe in their place of work. That is a shocking statistic, and, given those circumstances, it is no wonder that people are considering leaving the profession—I am surprised that it is only 13 per cent, as it would be a lot higher in any other business. Those people are clearly passionate, love what they do and do not want to give up, but that is a real concern.

I will sum all this up. The Accounts Commission and Audit Scotland have done intensive work in producing the report and highlighting the issues, and it has rightly received a huge amount of media coverage over the past month. Based on your professional judgment, is it Audit Scotland's position that, by 2030, the Promise will be delivered? Alternatively, is there a risk that the Promise will be broken for some or all care-experienced young people?

Stephen Boyle: Our report draws attention to the need for more pace and momentum if the Promise is to be delivered by 2030 and for the appropriate steps to be taken around resources, workforce and clarity of roles and responsibilities, together with targeting of funding to give the opportunity to meet the Promise by 2030 as was intended. It would be premature to be definitive one way or the other. Five years is a long time and systems can change and evolve far quicker than that with the right intent. It would not be wise to be definitive one way or the other, with so many years to go.

Jamie Greene: Might you revisit the issue in coming years to follow and track progress?

Stephen Boyle: We will certainly track progress on our recommendations. I am quite sure that the Accounts Commission—and, indeed, perhaps my successor—will factor the issue into programmes of work that Audit Scotland will take forward.

Jamie Greene: Thank you.

The Convener: Graham Simpson wants to come back in with a very quick question.

Graham Simpson: It is directed at Andrew Burns. You said earlier that 15 children's services planning partnerships have the Promise as a priority, which leaves a number that do not. Do you have a list of those that do not that you can provide to us, perhaps in writing? Do you know why they do not have the issue as a priority?

Andrew Burns: The straight answer is that I do not have that list at my fingertips. I do not know whether Claire Tennyson or Mark MacPherson can help me out and say whether we have that data, but I do not have it available at the moment.

Stephen Boyle: We can certainly write to the committee with some of that detail.

Andrew Burns: I just confirm that 15 have it as a priority and 15 do not have it as a priority.

Graham Simpson: Do you know which 15 have it as a priority?

Claire Tennyson: We do not have that detail. Our audit work has been at a national level and we have utilised existing reviews. The Scottish Government monitors the children's services plans and has published a review, so we could obtain that information.

Graham Simpson: Okay.

The Convener: If you could have a look and get back to us in writing, that would be helpful.

I have one final question, which picks up on the theme of 15, as it is about paragraph 15 in your report, which made for interesting reading. You describe how, in 2020, an independent strategic adviser was appointed, presumably by the Scottish Government. In the following year, 2021, an oversight board was established and the independent strategic adviser was made the chair of that board. In 2022, the adviser was asked to step down as the chair, but it took over a year for that process to be completed. The adviser did not fully step down but became a co-chair, along with somebody else who was appointed as a co-chair.

You describe that in very diplomatic terms, but it looks like a very messy situation. It also conjures up questions about the point about clarity of roles and responsibilities. Is the independent strategic adviser an adviser to the Government, the oversight board or The Promise Scotland? Why was the decision taken that it was not appropriate for the person that held that role to continue as the chair of the oversight board? Why was there clearly some resistance to that from some quarters?

Stephen Boyle: There are a few questions there. The overarching point is that the situation speaks to the lack of clarity on roles and responsibilities that we reference throughout the report and the need for consideration as to whether the governance structures are helping or hindering the delivery of the Promise.

On some of the specifics, again I might not have the insight that you are looking for on whether there was resistance or otherwise. However, the reporting lines are to ministers. The strategic adviser reports to ministers on the delivery of the Promise—that is the fundamental role of the independent strategic adviser, who, I am sure, would be able to say more about some of the specifics of their work.

There are many roles and responsibilities, whether it is the oversight board, the role of Government and COSLA, the multiple public bodies that are involved, together with The Promise Scotland and its officials and a separate team in the Scottish Government supporting the work of the delivery of the Promise. We think that it is right that there is a bit of a pause to consider whether the system is working as intended, so that people who are on the front line and tasked with delivering the Promise have the right level of support and clarity on how to deliver their work.

The Convener: Okay—good. That is a nice bookend, because we finish as we started, by looking at the governance arrangements.

I thank the Auditor General, Mark MacPherson and Claire Tennyson from Audit Scotland, and Andrew Burns from the Accounts Commission, for their evidence. You have undertaken to have a look at some of our requests for a bit more data. We would very much appreciate it if you could supply us with that, because we will need to consider our next steps in reviewing the findings and recommendations in the report.

We will now have a further evidence session, but I suspend the meeting to allow for a change of witnesses. We will resume in five minutes or so.

11:00

Meeting suspended.

11:05

On resuming—

“Adult Disability Payment”

The Convener: I welcome everybody back to this morning’s meeting of the Public Audit Committee. I am very pleased to say that agenda item 3 is further consideration of the Auditor General’s report on adult disability payment. I am particularly pleased to welcome to the committee Edel Harris, who is the former chair of the independent review of adult disability payment. Thank you for joining us—it is greatly appreciated.

We have some questions to put to you, but, before we get to those, I invite you to make a short opening statement to get us under way.

Edel Harris OBE (Independent Review of Adult Disability Payment): Good morning. I apologise for not being there in person. Thank you for accommodating my attendance via Zoom.

The publication of my report in July this year marked a significant milestone in the on-going efforts to assess and enhance the effectiveness of adult disability payment in meeting the needs of disabled people in Scotland. The independence of the review was welcomed. From the outset, my goal has been to ensure that the ADP system is fair, transparent and supportive and that it empowers those whom it serves to live with dignity and to enhance their independence.

Since the transition from a reserved system of social security to one that is led and managed by the Scottish Government, there have been several welcome and positive changes that are evident when you compare the Scottish system with the personal independence payment, or PIP, process. Therefore, my recommendations are designed, first and foremost, to build on those great foundations. In addition, they are designed to improve the overall client experience and to promote more timely decision making. In my opinion, most importantly, the final set of recommendations is designed to ensure that we have a modern, outcomes-focused and much more realistic approach to determining eligibility.

It is worth highlighting in this short opening statement that, throughout the course of the review, many people gave very positive feedback on adult disability payment and Social Security Scotland. They spoke highly of staff interactions and described feeling respected during the application process. In particular, they welcomed the lack of medical assessments and the short-term assistance that is on offer in Scotland, which is unique to Scotland. I heard the word “kindness” often, and I witnessed at first hand on my visits to

the agency the culture and the values at the heart of Social Security Scotland.

Within my recommendations, the proposed changes to systems and policies—which include, for example, the provision of updated guidance and training—may be more readily achieved in the near term. Some recommendations come with a one-off cost, whereas others—especially those that relate to changes or potential changes to eligibility—will likely involve on-going costs.

As, I am sure, you can understand, estimating the change in benefit expenditure is challenging. Alongside the data that would be required and the assumptions that would need to be made in order to make robust calculations, there may also be some resulting behavioural changes by clients, so it may take time for changes in trends to become established enough for any costing analysis to be completed. Producing estimates of the scale of the impact on expenditure might be more straightforward where some of my recommendations relate to specific cohorts of people. In the report, you will see some illustrative examples.

I stress that this whole exercise considers only the potential extra costs of making changes. No work has been done or even been proposed on the potential wider benefits to the economy or to other state-funded services of making an investment in the people of Scotland. In an ideal world, decisions about eligibility would always be made on a human rights basis, rather than being led by cost considerations. However, I recognise the rising numbers and the gap between expenditure and block grant funding and the other financial limitations that the Government faces.

If social security is indeed viewed as an investment in the people of Scotland and a human right, as outlined in the charter and in legislation, I hope that ministers will use the findings of my review to design a truly world-leading disability payment system that is fair and supportive of disabled people's needs now and in the future.

The Convener: Thank you very much indeed for that opening statement.

When we took evidence from the Auditor General and his team on 1 October, he said some interesting things about where things were and what the Government's response was to your review and your recommendations. We will get into questions about that, as well as costings, because, even though we are the Public Audit Committee, we think—as you do—that we are not concerned simply with the financial cost implications of the system; we want to look at how it is being run and whether it is producing the intended outcomes.

I invite Joe FitzPatrick to put some questions to you.

Joe FitzPatrick: Good morning. I think that you have partly answered this question, but it would be good to hear about the background to the review, what spurred its being set up as an independent review and what its remit was. You have partly answered that, but could you give us a bit more detail on the remit and some information on how you went about carrying out your work?

Edel Harris: Yes, I would be happy to. The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice appointed me to chair the independent review in January 2024, work began on the review in February 2024 and, as you know, the report was published in July 2025. There was also an interim report, which was published on 5 November 2024.

The review took into account the analysis of the consultation on the eligibility criteria for the mobility component of ADP, which predates me—that was published in August 2023—and the analysis of the consultation and call for evidence on the daily living component of adult disability payment that was part of my review. That was published in June 2024. There were a lot of reports.

The Government asked me to look specifically at the activities and the descriptors—in other terminology, the eligibility criteria—that determine someone's entitlement to ADP and, in particular, how those apply to disabled people who live with fluctuating conditions. It asked me to assess people's experiences of applying for, receiving or challenging a decision about ADP or undergoing a review. That included the experiences of people who were unsuccessful in their application. It asked me to look at the consultation process, the specific guidance for practitioners and the guidance for decision makers to ensure that a rights-based model of social security was being applied. It also asked me to look at initial priorities on which early action might be possible, and those were outlined in the interim report that I mentioned, which was published in November last year.

The following issues were beyond the scope of the review: the purpose of ADP and the adequacy of payments. I have to say that the adequacy of payments came up a lot, but, as it was not in scope, I was not able to respond to some of the conversations that were had on that.

The Government also asked me not to look at the wider aspects of disability assistance—in other words, things that are not unique to ADP—and that was quite tricky. Those wider aspects include things such as supporting information and the special rules for terminal illness. That was quite challenging, because those are all parts of a

client's experience, so they came up naturally in the conversations that I had. I was not asked to consider whether there should be an alternative body to Social Security Scotland to deliver ADP.

In relation to the methodology, the most important thing to me, as someone who has worked with and for disabled people for almost my whole career, was to ensure that people with lived experience of a disability or a long-term health condition, and the organisations that support them, really had a voice and had their views and experiences listened to throughout the review. I hope that you can see that their input is at the heart of the report.

We had a comprehensive programme of engagement. I recruited an advisory group that consisted of 10 people who represented individuals with lived experience, as well as some welfare advisers who were very knowledgeable about ADP and the social security system.

11:15

I will not go through the whole list, but there were a lot of engagement sessions. I cannot remember the number of meetings that I had, but it ran into the hundreds. We also did an online public consultation and call for evidence, which ran between June and August 2024. In addition, I met the Scottish Government—in particular, members of the policy team—and Social Security Scotland officials on multiple occasions, to try to get a better understanding of the policy landscape and all the internal processes that have shaped people's experience.

As I mentioned, there was a consultation on the mobility component. In addition to that, Social Security Scotland did an evaluation of supporting information, and both those things formed part of my method of collating information.

Joe FitzPatrick: Thank you. I guess that you were restricted to some extent, and the cabinet secretary would want a degree of focus. I assume that it would be her intention to act on your recommendations. Have you had any indication from the Scottish Government of when it will be able to respond to your recommendations?

Edel Harris: Yes. It was set out quite clearly at the beginning of the review that there would be a response from ministers within six months of the publication of my final report. By my calculations, that would be by 1 February 2026 at the latest. I met with the cabinet secretary towards the end of the review and shared the final report with her, and she certainly intended to stick to that deadline. I think that everyone is expecting the Government's response to the recommendations to be made public.

Joe FitzPatrick: Do you expect the Government's response to say how it will deliver on your recommendations, or do you think it will be more finessed?

Edel Harris: Gosh—I have no idea. You can see how much hard work has gone into the report, not just by me but by the secretariat and everybody else, particularly the disabled people who have been involved in the review, and how much evidence has been gathered. I certainly hope that the response will be quite robust in responding to the recommendations—as you know, there are 58 of them—and saying whether the Government intends to implement none, a few or all of them. I have no idea, but I certainly hope that there will be a robust response. I think that disabled people and others who have been involved in the review would expect that.

Joe FitzPatrick: Okay. Thank you.

The Convener: When we took evidence from the Auditor General on 1 October, he said:

"I do not think that we are yet clear about the Government's intention around the review."

Edel, are you reasonably clear about the Government's intention around the review?

Edel Harris: I am certainly clear that it intends to respond to the report and my recommendations within six months of publication. Obviously, I do not know what that response will be—whether it will be a holding response or whether it will be, "We can implement some recommendations, but others will take more consideration or time." I really do not know what that response will look like, but the Government has made a very public commitment. It is less about my expectations than about those of the people who gave their time and shared some very personal stories and experiences with me. I think that there is a high expectation among the disabled people's community in Scotland and among welfare advisers, other key stakeholders and charities that the response will be published within six months of my report.

The Convener: Thanks for that response. I invite the deputy convener, Jamie Greene, to ask some questions of you.

Jamie Greene: Good morning. Thank you very much for joining us. Unfortunately, I have to be the one who talks about money—this is the Public Audit Committee—but I will try to limit it to what is in your report and what we have already heard from Audit Scotland and what is in its report. I will link it to some of the comments you made in your opening statement, to tease out some of the other issues, which are not just financial but very much linked to the finances of the delivery of this devolved benefit.

I will not state the obvious, but both reports point out some of the fiscal anomalies of the Government in Scotland introducing different benefits of this nature. To take one snapshot, in the financial year 2023-24, more was spent than was received from the block grant—to the tune of £171 million. However, looking ahead at the bigger picture, the forecast seems to suggest that, by 2029, the figure could be as high as £700 million to £800 million. Of course, the numbers will vary as we work through those years, but it is a substantial amount of money.

Given that the Scottish Government has a mandatory duty to balance its books, have you identified any concerns that resolving that variance of spend versus what is received may affect other areas of the wider welfare budget or other social security benefits? What effect might that have on recipients of other benefits, for example?

Edel Harris: I should caveat any answer to questions related to finances with the fact that I recognise that there is currently a gap in spending and that that forecast is based on none of the recommendations in my review being implemented—it is based on the status quo. I also understand that it does not take into account any changes that might be made within the wider United Kingdom. Again, I am focusing only on the changes that might relate to PIP and how that might impact the block grant funding for ADP. Of course, you could argue that, if the Scottish Government makes changes as a result of my review, there could be a reverse impact on UK Government funding, but we will park that for now. The caveat is that I am certainly not an expert in this area but I will do my best to answer your question.

I am not sure that I can add very much to Audit Scotland's findings on this, but you might have seen that, in my report, I quote the Fraser of Allander Institute's acknowledgement that the caseload for disability benefits is growing right across the UK, so it is not just a Scottish issue. However, the caseload is rising more rapidly in Scotland. I think that you heard from Audit Scotland about some of the reasons for that, although, during the course of my review, it was very hard to find evidence to determine what those reasons are. A lot of them are assumptions about things like the eligibility criteria remaining broadly similar, but Scotland's system is seen as being much more accessible, and it has a simpler application and review process. There are also some very practical things that are different and that come with a cost, such as the awarding of short-term assistance, which is unique to Scotland, and investment in things like local delivery and the independent advocacy service. All those costs are not being incurred, like for like, in the UK system.

My answer to your question is that, if there is that gap of £770 million before any further changes or recommendations are implemented, a very comprehensive piece of work needs to be done on what the additional costs, over and above the £770 million might be if the Scottish Government intends to implement any of my recommendations. As I said in my opening statement, in all these conversations we talk about costs—I totally understand that—but, as far as I know, no work is being proposed to look at what the potential wider economic benefits of investing in disability payments could be for Scotland, for society or for other state-funded services.

Jamie Greene: Thank you very much. I will pick up on something that you just said that I find very interesting. That figure of £770 million is, of course, based on a number of assumptions, but it also assumes that the status quo will continue for the next five years and does not take into account the Government's response to any of your recommendations. Therefore the obvious question is this. If, in an ideal world, from your point of view, the Government accepted and implemented all your recommendations, would that figure of £770 million go up or down?

Edel Harris: I cannot give an accurate answer to that question, because some work would obviously need to be done. However, we can probably assume that, when you start improving a system, you will have one-off costs around things like case management system changes. Some of those are quoted in the report, but they are very rough figures. For example, just for the case management system changes, the estimate was between £1.27 million and £2.9 million. So, at this stage, you could probably work out numbers for some of the increased costs. There are also some examples in the report of recommendations related to specific cohorts of people. One of the recommendations is around the automatic awarding of short-term assistance, which would mean that people would not have to apply for it. Obviously, there is an element of choice involved, but, putting that aside, there would be an automatic awarding of short-term assistance when people were going through redetermination and appeal, and we have been able to put numbers on that as an illustrative scenario in the report.

We can try to cost some things, such as automatic entitlement if someone is already in receipt of a blue badge for mobility or if they are already in receipt of an independent living fund award, for example. However, I think that the bigger cost implications would be around the benefit expenditure, because if you change the eligibility criteria and if—there are a lot of ifs here—the changes in the eligibility criteria result in a higher number of people being eligible, the cost will obviously increase. I say “if” because I do not

think it necessarily follows that, if you have a more modern, human-rights based social model and a disability outcomes-focused way of measuring eligibility—again, there are some examples of this in the appendices to my report—more people are eligible. My argument would be that these are people who are currently living with a disability or a long-term health condition who find that the current eligibility criteria and the application process are denying them their human right. It is very complex.

If the Scottish Government intended to review the eligibility criteria in the way I have recommended, a whole lot of work by people much cleverer than me would need to be done to analyse the costs. However, there is a broad assumption that, if you changed the eligibility criteria in the way that I have recommended, the outcome would most likely be a higher cost.

Jamie Greene: I understand that, and I am not passing any judgment, one way or the other, on whether that would be appropriate. However, I draw attention to what paragraph 40 of the Audit Scotland report says about the Scottish Government's responsibility under the "Our Charter" principle of delivering value for money. More importantly, the Auditor General made an interesting point about understanding what effect taking a different approach to social security would have on other bits of the same budget, which support the same cohort of people but in different ways. There is a whole other area that you could expand on—it is maybe for another day—in terms of where you see these benefits being an investment and the ways in which they could bring down expenditure in other public services. That is probably quite a big and complex area of policy to look at, but it is an important one.

Edel Harris: I do not mean that the words "value for money" mean different things in different circumstances, but I guess it depends on how you look at it in the context of what we are discussing. The policy intent, as I understand it, is that value for money is to be achieved not just through running a very efficient system, but also through the value that something brings to society by reducing things like poverty and enabling people to live more independent lives. As far as I am aware, the Scottish Government does not currently measure the success or otherwise of ADP in terms of poverty reduction or quality of life, so I would suggest that there is a gap there.

Jamie Greene: That is helpful. Thank you.

Colin Beattie: I have one or two quick questions. Paragraph 65 of the Auditor General's report indicates that the feedback that was received by the independent review contained a recurring theme of disabled people highlighting stress and anxiety caused by delays in the

system. Your review notes respondents' frustrations regarding some of the processes that have been adopted by Social Security Scotland, with mention of the application process, processing times and the lack of communication. Can you tell us a little bit more about the areas that are causing the biggest issues and why they are doing so?

11:30

Edel Harris: The less-than-positive issues that were raised by disabled people and other stakeholders related not to their overall experience, which was generally good, as I have already noted, but rather to their frustrations. In relation to some of the stories that I heard, "frustrations" does not go far enough, with some people talking about trauma. Some of their frustrations were with the processes that have been adopted by Social Security Scotland. The recurring ones that came up concerned the application process itself. It should be noted that the application form was designed with a lot of user testing and user input, and most people said that it was an improvement on the application form for the personal independence payment, but that still was probably the biggest issue. People were frustrated by issues including the technology, the form itself and the way that the questions are phrased.

Other recurring points of frustration included things such as the provision of supporting information and processing times, which came up consistently. There was frustration around the lack of communication, with people saying that, once an application was made, they did not hear for months or weeks about the status of their application, which caused a lot of anxiety. The telephone response times were mentioned and issues with third-party mandates came up, but I am aware that the agency is already doing something about that.

ADP is still a relatively new benefit, but those who work in the welfare advice space are now collecting a lot of data and are comparing decisions regarding different clients, and issues of inconsistency in decision making came up a fair bit.

The last few recurring themes concerned the lack of understanding of particular disabilities or conditions and the fear of losing an award if a redetermination request was being considered.

Those were the most frequently raised issues that seemed to be adding to people's anxiety about the whole process. There was a lot of discussion around fluctuating conditions, and I think that I have already mentioned accessible communication.

Colin Beattie: The Auditor General highlighted that survey scores are positive overall, which seems to align with your consultation findings, but Audit Scotland also noted that it is not clear what levels the Scottish Government would regard as acceptable or whether it expects better satisfaction scores for PIP, given that the approach to ADP is different. Audit Scotland suggested that Social Security Scotland should consider setting such a level as part of its evaluation and include results around dignity, fairness and respect in the public performance indicators to measure success in that regard. Do you agree with that?

Edel Harris: Yes, it certainly makes sense to me that, if you are setting so much store by treating people with dignity, fairness and respect, you would want to understand whether you are meeting those aspirations in at least the majority of client experiences. As you say, the percentages in the general customer client survey results—lots have been quoted in my report—are reasonably good in a lot of cases but in some cases, such as the responses from people with communication needs, the percentages drop quite significantly. I do not have the page in front of me at the moment, but I think that the satisfaction score in that category was around 30 per cent.

I agree with the suggestion that you refer to in as much as I think that we want to see positive change, and we all know that the things that get measured and reported on are the things that we focus on in culture and behaviours. If a lot of store is being set by those values and principles, we should find some way of measuring them.

The majority of people I spoke to and engaged with during my review felt that, in the ADP process, they had been treated in a very person-centred way when compared with the way that they had been treated in the PIP process, and that people were kind. They spoke positively about the staff interactions.

Colin Beattie: That is very good to hear. The problem is that aspects of dignity, fairness and respect are very subjective and are difficult to measure. You get responses to your questionnaires and so on, and you do your assessments, but how do you evaluate that information in a way that helps Social Security Scotland to put in place positive changes in response?

Edel Harris: I agree with your point to some extent. Dignity and respect are probably easier to measure if you are clear about how you will do that, but fairness is very subjective. Interestingly—and there is a section on this in my report—when we were looking at alternatives to a points-based system for making an award, because points-based systems are generally seen as being not very dignified and not in line with a social model of

disability or a human rights-based approach, I could not find an alternative to them. We had lots of engagement sessions on the issue, because that approach was universally disliked. Ultimately, the issue came down to fairness, because disabled people and welfare advisers were saying that, if there is no form of measurement, it is impossible to challenge the fairness of a decision.

There are probably ways that you can measure how people are treated, but I think that the fairness point is probably more complex. During the course of the review, someone said to me that you could have two different decisions and they could both be right—that blew my mind for a little while until I stopped and thought about it. As soon as you bring human decision making, probability and so on into a decision-making process, some decisions might not appear to be fair for everyone. That is one of the challenges in the system.

Colin Beattie: I have one last question. Given the Auditor General's comment that the Scottish Government lacks a clear framework to assess the overall impact of ADP, how might the recommendations of your review support the development of such an evaluation strategy?

Edel Harris: The overall evaluation is important. I do not think that I addressed this directly, but I touched on it in the context of the purpose of ADP. If the purpose of ADP is to support disabled people with the additional costs of having a disability, there is a gap in that there is no evidence of what people are spending the money on and whether it is indeed helping to reduce poverty and promote independence and wellbeing. If you are looking towards an evaluation strategy, some of those things that I hinted at in the report would be relevant. At the moment, because it is still a relatively new disability payment, there are probably some other more fundamental things that we should be measuring and evaluating before we start looking at that bigger picture.

To be clear, because I am conscious that I am representing the voices of lots of different people who had many different opinions on things, I should say that there was also quite a body of disabled people who had quite an adverse reaction to the idea of any sort of measurement of how they were spending their adult disability payment. They had a real reaction to the suggestion that it might ever be part of an evaluation, because, obviously, that involves human rights around choice, privacy and dignity.

Graham Simpson: I want to follow up on what you were saying about eligibility and whether we monitor whether the payment improves people's lives. You seem to be saying that there is no data on that, so we do not know what difference that has made to people, if any. Do you not think that there should be some research into that?

Edel Harris: There is some research. From carrying out the review, I know that there was limited research on, for example, the additional costs of living with a disability. I do not have the page in front of me, but I think that I quote work that was done by the charity Scope to assess what those additional costs might be. That takes us into the conversation about adequacy of payment, which was definitely out of the scope of my review.

We have some evidence—not at an individual level but collectively—on what the additional costs of living with a disability might be. In my interim report, I made a recommendation or an observation that further research should be done so that we have a much better idea of what those additional costs might be. As far as I am aware, we do not currently collect any data, and I do not think that the Department for Work and Pensions does, either.

That probably goes back to the point about human rights. No one would ask you or I how we choose to spend our money, whether we are disabled or not, so there was quite a reaction when it was suggested that that could be part of an evaluation or a way of measuring the effectiveness of ADP.

I think that it would be quite complicated to do, but, as far as I am aware, Scotland does not collect that data at the moment.

Graham Simpson: You say in the foreword to your report that you are

“concerned with how the changes at UK level may impact disabled people in Scotland especially in relation to how people in receipt of certain rates of Adult Disability Payment may be entitled to other benefits.”

Can you expand on that?

Edel Harris: Yes. At the time of writing the report, the UK Government had produced its green paper. Pretty quickly afterwards, as we will all recall, some of the changes were reversed—if that is the right word—and Sir Stephen Timms announced his review of the PIP assessment, which I think is due to report in autumn 2026.

I met Sir Stephen Timms on several occasions, during the review and more recently, to share the findings of my review and to advise on the methodology that was used in Scotland to ensure a genuinely inclusive process.

I am most concerned about how the changes at the UK level might impact on disabled people in Scotland, particularly where people are entitled to other benefits as a result of receiving a certain level of adult disability payment. That is referred to as passporting or passported benefits. There is a big fear in the community of disabled people about that at the moment, because, although the Timms review—I am certainly not an expert on the Timms

review, but this is my understanding—is looking at personal independence payment, it is not looking at the potential impact of the removal of the work capability assessment for universal credit, which is being debated or discussed, and it is not looking at linking the universal credit health element to the PIP assessment. Again, I am not an expert in the detail of that—the committee probably does not need the detail—but decisions that are taken at UK Government level, not just related to PIP but related to that wider welfare reform, could definitely impact the lives of disabled people in Scotland.

Equally, if any of my recommendations were implemented, particularly those on the eligibility criteria, that might impact on both Governments’ conversations about block grant funding. That said, if we do anything in Scotland that increases the number of people who are eligible, we will not necessarily receive funding to meet the increased cost through the block grant.

11:45

Graham Simpson: That is a very topical subject.

Edel Harris: I am not an expert on that.

Graham Simpson: You also say:

“The number of people receiving Adult Disability Payment is forecast to grow from 379,000 in 2024-25 to 703,000 in 2030-31.”

I had to pinch myself when I read that. According to the Scottish Fiscal Commission, that would lead to the costs rising from £3.1 billion to £5.4 billion. Those are huge sums. I presume that that figure would increase further if your recommendations were followed. All this is becoming rather unsustainable, is it not?

Edel Harris: As I said a moment ago, there would potentially be one-off costs if some of my recommendations were implemented, particularly for additional training or systems changes, for example. Also, there could be additional costs if policy changes were made, such as the one that I mentioned earlier involving automatically awarding short-term assistance. However, let us say that we have activities and descriptors to better reflect people’s real lives, that we modernise things—in my view, the current system does not reflect modern-day life—and that we look more at outcomes rather than activities. If all those changes are made, as I am suggesting, it does not necessarily follow that more people will be eligible; it just means that we will have a fairer and more realistic way of measuring eligibility.

Graham Simpson: The figures that I quoted are from your report.

Edel Harris: Yes, I know, but those figures just reflect the status quo. The final part of my report tries, where possible, to put numbers on some of the recommendations while noting that estimating change in benefit expenditure as a result of implementing any of the recommendations is an incredibly difficult thing to do at the moment, because we just do not have the data that we would need to make those calculations. The figures that are quoted simply look at expected increase in case load, irrespective of whether any of my recommendations are taken into account.

Graham Simpson: But you told us earlier that, if the Government followed your recommendations, it would cost more.

Edel Harris: Yes. I think that, on the balance of probabilities, it would. I just do not have those numbers to hand. I am making the point that one-off costs would definitely be incurred if some of the recommendations were implemented, such as those on systems changes and on improvements to training. There would also be additional costs if some of the policy changes that I am recommending were made—for example, automatic entitlement for people who are in receipt of a blue badge or who are already in receipt of an independent living fund grant. I suppose that the biggest cost increase would be if benefit expenditure increased as a result of changes to eligibility.

If you make a system more modern, more outcomes-focused and better reflective of people's real lives, and if you take into account things like fluctuating conditions, it does not necessarily follow that more people will be eligible, therefore the benefit expenditure will go up. That will be determined very much by what that new set of eligibility criteria looks like.

I hope that that explains it. On the balance of probabilities, you would have to argue that more people might be eligible, therefore the costs would go up, but work on that has not been done yet.

Graham Simpson: That is the way it looks to me, but I will ask you one final question. The report highlights the need for a more person-centred and trauma-informed approach to ADP. What specific changes do you think Social Security Scotland should implement to achieve this?

Edel Harris: There are a number of recommendations in the report, particularly in the section on processes that work, which are about being a learning organisation and building on the good foundations that are already there. I cannot stress enough how, when people compared the ADP process to the PIP process, their feeling was that it was much kinder in nature.

In this meeting I have already talked about the things that cause frustration and stress. People used the word “trauma” often when describing their experiences of being assessed for PIP, so things like not having the medical assessments as part of the Scottish system have been welcomed.

Although the agency has started to do some work around trauma-informed practice, in my view, having spoken to agency colleagues and from gathering the evidence, information and stories from disabled people themselves, more could be done to ensure that, when clients are engaging with Social Security Scotland, there is an awareness not just of trauma in that experience but of the trauma that people might have experienced in their life. One of the recommendations in my report is that the agency do more in that regard.

The Convener: Thank you. I have a couple of final questions. The first question relates to something that you were speaking to Graham Simpson about, not in the last set of questions but in the ones before that. An argument has been paraded in Scotland that the reforms or even the removal of personal independence payment in England and Wales have had no effect in Scotland because we have adult disability payment. However, as you have explained, reforms to PIP have implications for Scotland because of the passporting issue that you have identified, the Barnett consequentials that would potentially result from such reforms and the way in which the fiscal framework operates, which means, in other words, that if the benefit bill in Scotland goes up, the financial settlement that comes through the formula goes down. Can you confirm your view that there is a direct relationship between what happens with the Timms review and what the consequences will be for recipients of adult disability payment in Scotland?

Edel Harris: Without knowing the outcome of the Timms review, it is difficult to answer with any great deal of certainty, but any changes to personal independence payment might have an impact on the funding. For argument's sake, let us say that, at the end of the PIP review, there is some overall reduction in spend. That would have an impact. However, I have to say that when I last met Sir Stephen Timms he was clear that, although there was no additional money to be found, the review was not a cost-cutting exercise, and I suppose we should take him at his word. Obviously, though, any changes resulting from that would have an impact on the block grant funding at the higher level.

What most disabled people I spoke to were most concerned about or fearful of was the issue of passporting, which I have already mentioned. There are some proposals that the Government

look at universal credit and link the health element to the PIP assessment. At the moment, that would be linked to the ADP assessment, but if there are any changes, that could have an impact on people's income. There is also an issue around the work capability assessment. Again, when you look at a disabled person's overall benefit income, at the moment some of it comes via adult disability payment, but some of it comes from benefits that are not devolved to Scotland. There is, of course, a risk that some of the changes, either in Scotland or at the UK level, could impact on the overall amount of money that someone receives.

The Convener: Thank you. I will ask you another question to get your response on the record. You will have read the Audit Scotland report on adult disability payment. Do you agree with the recommendations that are made in that report?

Edel Harris: Yes, I do. Although we were carrying out our reviews at broadly the same time and we did meet on a couple of occasions, the scope and the focus of the two reviews were quite different. I stress that the Audit Scotland review refers to the current system. If there were any fundamental changes following my review, Audit Scotland might need or want to repeat its process, because obviously its recommendations are based on the here and now. I agree with all its recommendations; they make good sense. Most of its recommendations relate to things that were out of the scope of my review, so it is good to take the two reports together.

The Convener: Thank you. That is very helpful. Finally, you have alluded already to the fact that your report makes 58 recommendations across a range of areas. That might not be quite as big a range as you might have liked; nonetheless, 58 is a lot of recommendations. Do you have a view about what the priorities should be for the Scottish Government in the short, medium and long terms? By February of next year, or hopefully even before that, if the Government said, "We accept the recommendations of Edel Harris's independent review on adult disability payment" and you were in the Government's shoes, which ones would you look to accelerate and implement in the short term and which ones might be more for the medium and longer terms?

Edel Harris: I know that there are a lot of recommendations, but there are several that could be implemented relatively easily with no implications for recurring costs. Those smaller things would enhance the client experience, so I hope that they are received positively. However, if I had to prioritise overall—and it is a tricky thing to do, because obviously I think that all of the recommendations are important—I would highlight the recommendations in the part of the report

entitled "A better future". If Scotland continues to operate within the personal independence payment framework, although we can make it a more dignified and compassionate process, we are not fundamentally changing anything and we would not be meeting the aspirations that are set out in the legislation or the charter.

This is an opportunity in time. It is a very big opportunity to design a world-leading, holistic, person-centred disability payment system that is supportive of disabled people's needs. If I were to be pressed further and could choose only two recommendations out of that "better future" part of the report, given the overwhelming response to the review and all the engagement and conversations that I had, those two would be removing the reference to a fixed distance in assessing mobility and replacing the 50 per cent rule with an improved application of the reliability criteria.

The Convener: Thank you very much indeed for that clarity and for concluding the meeting with a very hopeful and visionary message of a better future.

Edel Harris, thank you for your time this morning. Your evidence has been very useful for us. We have a session with the Scottish Government and Social Security Scotland coming up very soon. I do not know whether we will take the opportunity to press them to get a response earlier than February about their view on the recommendations that you have made in your very important report. We will make sure that you are aware of when that evidence session is, so that you can tune in or follow it later on.

11:59

Meeting continued in private until 12:19.

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