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## **Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee**

# **Annual Report of the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee for 2024-25**



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# Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee

To consider and report on the following (and any additional matter added under Rule 6.1.5A)—

- a. matters relating to equal opportunities, and upon the observance of equal opportunities within the Parliament; and
- b. matters relating to human rights.
- c. matters relating to civil justice within the responsibility of the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs.

## 2. In these Rules

(a) “equal opportunities” includes the prevention, elimination or regulation of discrimination between persons on grounds of sex or marital status, on racial grounds or on grounds of disability, age, sexual orientation, language or social origin or of other personal attributes, including beliefs or opinions such as religious beliefs or political opinions; and

(b) “human rights” includes Convention rights (within the meaning of section 1 of the Human Rights Act 1998) and other human rights as for example contained in any international convention, treaty or other international instrument ratified by the United Kingdom.

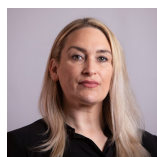


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# Committee Membership



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**Karen Adam**  
Scottish National Party



**Deputy Convener**  
**Maggie Chapman**  
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**Pam Gosal**  
Scottish Conservative  
and Unionist Party



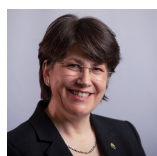
**Marie McNair**  
Scottish National Party



**Paul O'Kane**  
Scottish Labour



**Evelyn Tweed**  
Scottish National Party



**Tess White**  
Scottish Conservative  
and Unionist Party

# Introduction

1. This annual report covers the work of the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee during the Parliamentary year from 13 May 2024 to 12 May 2025.

## Membership changes

2. The changes in Committee membership during the reporting year were as follows:

### Members

- Meghan Gallacher left the Committee on 10 October 2024 and was replaced by Tess White.
- Annie Wells left the Committee on 10 October 2024 and was replaced Pam Gosal.

### Substitutes

- Mark Ruskell left the Committee on 26 June 2024 and was replaced by Lorna Slater.
- Fulton MacGregor left the Committee on 26 June 2024 and was replaced by Elena Whitham.
- Craig Hoy left the Committee on 10 October 2024 and was replaced by Rachael Hamilton on 6 November 2024.
- Elena Whitham left the Committee on 20 November 2024 and was replaced by Clare Adamson.

# Meetings

3. The Committee met a total of 29 times during the reporting period:
  - 2 meetings were held entirely in private
  - 27 meetings included private items

The reasons for taking business in private included to consider the Committee's work programme, to consider draft reports or to consider evidence heard during meetings.

4. In addition, the Committee held two informal, private engagement sessions. These are highlighted later in the report.

# Legislation

## Bills

### Regulation of Legal Services (Scotland) Bill

5. [The Regulation of Legal Services \(Scotland\) Bill](#) was introduced to the Scottish Parliament on 20 April 2023. The Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee was then chosen as the lead committee for scrutiny of the Bill.
6. Formal evidence sessions at Stage 1 began on 3 October 2023 and concluded with an evidence session with the Scottish Government on 5 December 2023.
7. The Committee was due to start Stage 2 proceedings on 14 May 2024. However, uncertainty around the Scottish Government's approach to the Bill resulted in a significant delay to Stage 2 and ultimately Stage 2 did not take place until January 2025. The Committee considered and disposed of more than 600 amendments over its meetings on [21](#) and [28](#) January, completing Stage 2 on the second day.

### Disability Commissioner (Scotland) Bill

8. [The Disability Commissioner \(Scotland\) Bill](#) is a Member's Bill, which was introduced by Jeremy Balfour MSP on 8 February 2024. The Bill was referred to this Committee for scrutiny.
9. The objective of the Bill is to establish a Disability Commissioner for Scotland, whose primary purpose will be to promote and safeguard the rights of disabled people.
10. To assist the Committee in its future scrutiny of the Bill, a call for views (public opinion) was launched online on 28 March 2024 <sup>1</sup>.
11. Over the course of five meetings between June and September 2024 the Committee took evidence on the Bill, concluding with a session with the member in charge on 17 September 2024.
12. The Committee also held informal engagement sessions with several disabled people on 10 September 2024. The sessions, held in the Scottish Parliament and in Glasgow, gave people the opportunity to relate to Committee members the barriers and challenges they experience.
13. The Committee published its [Stage 1 report](#) to Parliament on 10 December 2024. In that report the Committee made no recommendation on the general principles of the Bill, noting the upcoming work of the SPCB Supported Bodies Landscape Review Committee.
14. The SPCB Supported Bodies Landscape Review Committee is yet to report and in the absence of its report the Stage 1 debate for the Bill is yet to take place.

## Subordinate legislation

15. During the course of the reporting year, the Committee considered the following number of Scottish statutory instruments (SSIs):
  - 6 SSIs subject to the affirmative procedure
  - 10 SSIs subject to the negative procedure

# Inquiries/case studies

## Suicide Prevention in Scotland

16. As part of its work programme discussion at its meeting on Tuesday 19 December 2023<sup>2</sup>, the Committee agreed to undertake a short inquiry into suicide prevention in Scotland.
17. The focus of the inquiry was to:
  - Scrutinise the Scottish Government and COSLA's Suicide Prevention Strategy and Action Plan, its anticipated outcomes and progress to date
  - Assess to what degree budget allocation to the Strategy and Action Plan are sufficient, and to what degree budget allocations in other areas of Government will assist or hinder its delivery
  - Establish to what degree the unequal distribution of deaths from suicide across different population groups are being accounted for in the Strategy and its implementation
  - Determine to what degree the voices of those with lived experience are being meaningfully heard within the Strategy and how it is implemented.
18. To assist in the Committee's scrutiny and evidence, a short online consultation ran from 1 March to 29 March 2024. A total of 41 responses were subsequently published online<sup>3</sup>.
19. The Committee took formal evidence on 23 April<sup>4</sup> and 30 April<sup>5</sup>, as well as undertaking private engagement on 7 May.
20. The Committee concluded its evidence taking on the inquiry on 28 May when it heard from the Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport and COSLA.
21. Following that session the Committee wrote to the [Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport](#), receiving a response [in September 2024](#). The Committee subsequently [followed up on that letter](#). The Committee will return to reflect on progress before the end of the session.

## Pre-Budget Scrutiny 2024-2025

22. The Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee undertakes pre and post budget scrutiny to influence the Scottish Government's approach and assess the decisions taken.
23. Over the course of the session, the Committee has built a solid understanding of human rights budgeting and a useful evidence base and examples of how the principles of human rights budgeting can support budget scrutiny. This reflects the Scottish Government's stated intentions of incorporating the UN Convention of

### Human Rights into Scots' Law.

24. The Committee agreed a three-year pre-budget scrutiny plan to look at each principle of human rights budgeting in turn: participation in year 1, transparency in year 2 and accountability in year 3.
25. For the 2025-26 period, the Committee focussed its work on Budget transparency. The Committee was particularly interested in transparency in the context of human rights budgeting, and the role of National Outcomes in supporting transparent and data-driven decision-making and mainstreaming equalities across portfolios.
26. The Committee took evidence on the budget at its meetings on [29 October](#) and [5 November](#).
27. Following these sessions the [Committee wrote to the Minister for Equalities](#) setting out its findings.
28. Further to the publication of the budget, the Committee held a session with the Minister for Equalities on [25 February 2025](#) to understand how equalities considerations were used in making decisions on this year's budget. The session also provided an opportunity to reflect on last year's work on transparency and build toward this year's work on accountability.

## Human Rights Bill

29. Following the Scottish Government's decision not to introduce a Scottish Human Rights Bill in the current parliamentary session, the Committee agreed to hold two evidence sessions to hear views from stakeholders and academics on the decision, what impact it may have and any suggested ways forward.
30. At its meetings on [1 October 2024](#) and [8 October 2024](#) the [Committee held those evidence sessions](#).
31. The Committee will continue to explore the impact of the absence of this legislation and what can be done in the interim in the absence of a bill being introduced this session.

## Learning Disabilities, Autism and Neurodivergence Bill

32. The Committee held evidence sessions to consider the impact of the Scottish Government's announcement to delay the introduction of the Learning Disabilities, Autism and Neurodivergence Bill (LDAN Bill).
33. The Committee held a session with key stakeholders at its meeting on [26 November 2024](#).
34. The following week, at its meeting on [3 December 2024](#), the Committee followed-up on the issues raised in the previous week's session with the Minister for Social

### Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport.

35. The Committee has continued to pursue this issue and in March 2025 the Committee held an informal session with autistic disabled people's organisations. [The Convener put some of the concerns arising out of this session to the First Minister.](#)
36. In the absence of an LDAN Bill, and in light of the ongoing concerns highlighted to the Committee, it has agreed to undertake an inquiry on neurodivergence in Scotland in the last year of this parliamentary session.

### Learning Disabilities, Autism and Neurodivergence Bill evidence session



Source: Scottish Parliament

## Non-Implementation of Acts

37. In addition to holding sessions on bills that were not introduced by the Scottish Government, the Committee held sessions on legislation passed by the Parliament, but which has not been implemented.
38. Specifically, the Committee explored the impact of the delay of the implementation of all or some provisions within the following three Acts:
  - Female Genital Mutilation (Protection and Guidance) (Scotland) Act 2020
  - The Children (Scotland) Act 2020
  - Domestic Abuse Protection (Scotland) Act 2021
39. At its meeting on [10 December 2024](#) the Committee heard from the Minister for Parliamentary Business. The Minister subsequently [wrote to the Committee](#) setting

out how the Scottish Government intends to progress work on implementing this legislation.

40. Following the meeting the Committee agreed to keep monitoring this issue to ensure progress is made. The Committee will be hearing from the relevant Ministers with responsibility for the individual Acts at its meeting on 24 June 2025.

## Aarhus Convention

41. The Aarhus Convention (the Convention) is a UN treaty from 1998 with a focus on environmental rights from a governance or procedural perspective. It is aimed at improving “environmental democracy, i.e. the ability of the public to assert their rights, including in the courts.
42. There is a Compliance Committee which can decide whether states have complied with the Convention. The Compliance Committee has for some time (since 2011) found that the UK and Scotland are not complying with the access to justice rules in the Convention.
43. The Committee held a session on [12 November](#) considering the Convention. At the meeting the Committee heard from key stakeholders and the Minister for Victims and Community Safety.
44. The Committee continued its consideration of the Aarhus Convention in the context of a joint Chamber debate with the Net Zero Energy and Transport Committee on [3 April 2025](#).
45. The Committee will build on this work in the coming year in the context of its civil legal aid inquiry.

## Operation of the Public Sector Equality Duty

46. The Committee agreed to undertake a short inquiry into the Scottish-specific Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED). The PSED is a legal requirement for public authorities in Scotland to consider equality when carrying out their functions.
47. In the inquiry the Committee explored whether the Scottish Government’s proposed reforms to the Scottish specific duties will deliver improvements in delivery of the three aims of the general duty. Specifically, the Committee explored the following themes:
  - The extent to which the Scottish specific PSED is currently delivering on the three aims of the general duty and in turn improving outcomes for people with protected characteristics;
  - The extent to which public authorities understand the terms of the three aims of the general duty and the requirements of the specific duty;
  - Whether the proposed reforms will assist public authorities in embedding an equalities focus;

- Why the Scottish Government’s original proposals have been diluted; and
  - How effective is the Equality and Human Rights Commission in regulating public authorities’ performance against the PSED.
48. The Committee issued a call for views and took evidence at its meetings on [4](#), [11](#) and [18](#) March.
49. Having concluded evidence taking, the Committee agreed to delay consideration of a report until it had reflected on the implications of the judgment in *For Women Scotland Ltd (Appellant) v the Scottish Ministers (Respondent)*. The Committee will return to consider its report shortly. Moreover, the Committee has agreed to hold evidence sessions in Autumn 2025 on the Equality and Human Rights Commission's revised Code of Practice arising from the the judgment in *For Women Scotland Ltd (Appellant) v the Scottish Ministers (Respondent)*.

## Civil Legal Aid

50. Access to justice has been a key theme of the Committee’s work during the course of this session. In particular, the Committee has taken an interest in the provision of legal aid and the increasing challenges faced by some in finding a lawyer to take on a case. The numbers of solicitors in Scotland offering to undertake legal aid work has fallen in recent months.
51. Prompted by this, the Committee agreed to undertake an inquiry at its meeting on civil legal aid.
52. At its meeting on 11 March the Committee agreed to focus its inquiry on:
- what is working and not working within the current civil legal aid system; and
  - what changes could be made in the shorter and longer term to address issues about access to civil legal aid.
53. It launched a [call for views](#) which closed on 17 April 2025.
54. Based on the responses to the call for views, the Committee has agreed a programme of oral evidence, which it will take at the beginning of the next reporting year.

## International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights

55. In April and May 2025 the Committee held sessions on the recent [Concluding Observations](#) issued by the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) following the seventh periodic review of the United Kingdom’s compliance with the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR).

- 56. The purpose of the sessions was to consider Scotland’s role in the UK’s implementation of international human rights obligations, and follow-up action in relation to the CESCR’s recommendations.
- 57. The Committee took evidence from civil society groups and the Scottish Human Rights Commission at its meeting on [29 April](#), before putting the issues raised in this session to the Minister for Equalities at its meeting on [6 May](#).
- 58. The Committee will be considering its findings at the beginning of the next reporting year.

ICESCR evidence session



Source: Scottish Parliament

# Petitions

## **Petition PE1787: The use of Makaton sign language in the legal system**

59. Although the Committee agreed to close the petition in the previous reporting year, it agreed at its meeting on 4 February 2025<sup>6</sup> to seek an update from the Scottish Government on progress made on the issues raised by the petition, particularly in light of neither the Human Rights Bill nor the LDAN Bill having been introduced.
60. The Committee therefore wrote to the Minister for Equalities on 24 February 2025<sup>7</sup> and received a response from the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs on 18 March 2025<sup>8</sup>.

## Equal opportunities and engagement

61. The Committee held two informal engagement sessions during the reporting period.
62. The Committee places great value and learning from its collaboration with, and support from, external organisations and people sharing their views and lived experiences and would like to take this opportunity to express thanks to all those involved.
63. The Committee also wishes to acknowledge and thank all those colleagues in the Scottish Parliament's Participation and Communities' Team (PACT), the Scottish Parliament's Information Centre (SPICe) and the Scottish Parliament's Communications Office (PCO), without whom our engagement sessions would not be possible.
64. Thanks also go to colleagues in the Scottish Parliament's Public Information and Languages office, Security, Broadcasting and Visitor Services Teams for their communications and assistance in welcoming all those attending where we have highlighted specific accessibility requirements for both formal Committee meetings and informal sessions.
65. Of particular note was the valuable advice and assistance in providing British Sign Language interpreters and speech-to-text-reporters for formal Committee proceedings.
66. The Committee's first informal engagement sessions took place in private on 10 September 2024 to assist the Committee in its scrutiny at Stage 1 of the Disability Commissioner (Scotland) Bill.
67. Sessions took place with people with lived experience in Glasgow, the Scottish Parliament and online, with Committee Members allocated to cover a specific session.
68. The Committee would like to thank Glasgow Disability Alliance for all their assistance in leading up to the facilitation and hosting of the session which took place in Glasgow.
69. The Committee would also like to thank Disability Equality Scotland and Inclusion Scotland for all their support.
70. The Committee's second informal engagement session took place online on 25 March 2025 to hear from representatives of autistic disabled people's organisations on the impact of the delay in introducing the LDAN Bill and key issues around this. The Committee extends its thanks to the six organisations who were involved in planning and participating in the session.
  - Autistic Mutual Aid Society (AMASE)
  - Autism Rights Group Highland (ARGH)
  - Autistic Voices Advocating Together for Autonomous Rights – Borders (AVATAR)

- Aurora Consulting
- Diversified
- Scottish Ethnic Minority Autistics (SEMA)

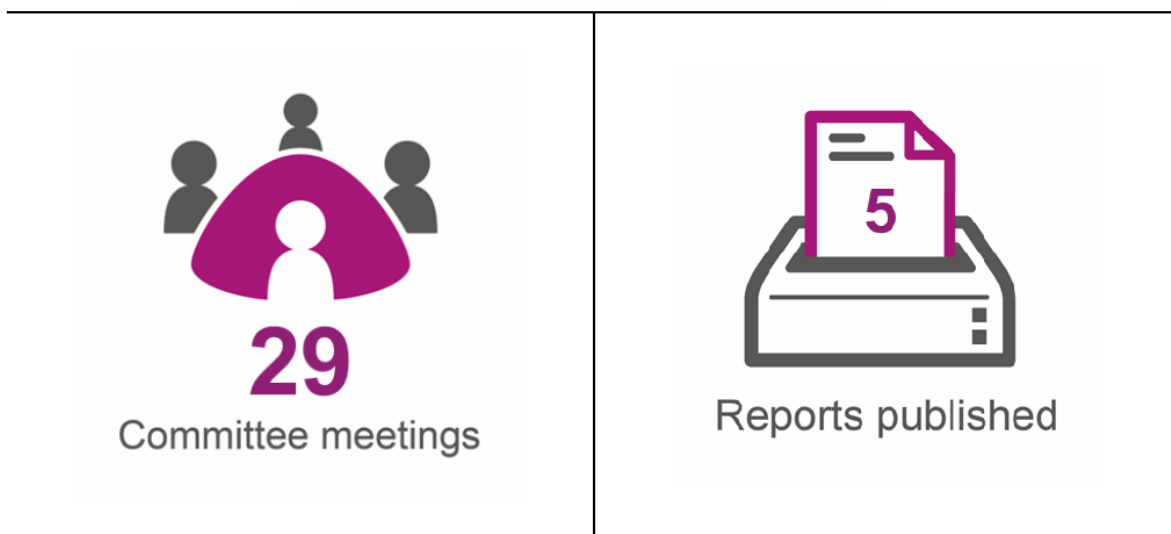
71. As noted earlier, subsequent to this session the Committee agreed to an inquiry on neurodivergence in Scotland.

Infographic of Committee statistics



83

Number of people  
who gave evidence



Source: Scottish Parliament

- [1] Scottish Parliament. (2024, March 28). Disability Commissioner (Scotland) Bill call for views. Retrieved from <https://yourviews.parliament.scot/ehrcj/disability-commissioner-bill/>
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- [8] Scottish Government. (2025, March 18). Letter from the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs to the Convener of the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee. Retrieved from <https://www.parliament.scot/-/media/files/committees/equalities-human-rights-and-civil-justice-committee/correspondence/2025/petition-pe1787-the-use-of-makaton-sign-language-in-the-legal-system-24-february-2025.pdf>



