

Dear Convener,

I write to thank you for the invite to appear before the Economy and Fair Work Committee on 1 May to discuss the disability employment gap. I was grateful for the opportunity to outline the work of Skills Development Scotland (SDS) in this regard. I am also delighted to write to the Committee with the further information which I agreed to provide.

I would like to start with the information I agreed to provide in response to questions about customer feedback. As I said to members on the day, we regularly ask customers for feedback on the services we provide – the voice of the customer is central in our approach to the development and delivery of services. Please see the information below about projects which are regularly carried out in order to gain the views of customers who have used our Career, Information, Advice and Guidance (CIAG) services as well as those who have undertaken an apprenticeship.

### **CIAG – key customer feedback**

Feedback from secondary school pupils and local delivery centre customers is collected through questionnaires distributed electronically after a CIAG intervention. Results are collated at school, local authority, SDS region and national-level to provide feedback.

Parents and Carers research gathers feedback on SDS services from across all 32 local authorities in Scotland. This covers the views of parents and carers of secondary school pupils. It is undertaken by SDS's Evaluation & Research team on an annual basis. Around 2,000 parents and carers provide feedback each year. The feedback is used to inform the design and improvement of SDS services. It also informs the way SDS communicates and engages with parents through our service offer. Results from the latest research will be available in Autumn 2024.

SDS has three regular research projects which gather in-depth feedback from customers, including school pupils. These are:

- [Young People in Scotland \(S1-S6\)](#)
- [Pupils Voice \(S4 – S6\)](#)
- [Young People's Career Ambitions \(post-school\)](#)

Young People in Scotland covers around 1,500 secondary school pupils. It is conducted by Ipsos Scotland as an omnibus survey. SDS has previously paid for questions to be included covering post-school intentions, perceptions of apprenticeships and their experience of accessing CIAG services. SDS is currently examining the feasibility of conducting its own research with secondary school pupils in the broad general education phase (S1-S3) in collaboration with partners.

Pupils Voice gathers feedback from secondary school pupils (S4 – S6) aged 16+ years. The research is conducted by SDS's Evaluation & Research team. Senior phase pupils are asked to reflect on the CIAG support they received from SDS. Additional questions have

also been included at the request of the Scottish Government. Pupils Voice generated 9,000 responses in 2023. It is now be conducted annually.

Young People’s Career Ambitions (YPCA) gathers insight from recent school leavers in Scotland on their choices, influences and motivations in making post-school decisions. The research is conducted by SDS’s Evaluation & Research team. The most-recent results are from 2022, when around 1,500 responses were received. YPCA will now be conducted annually and will be live in-field in September or October.

### School Year Results for 2023/24

	Customer Group Mean Scores (out of 10 with 10 being the best)					
	<u>Centre</u>		<u>School</u>			
Question	Next Steps (151)	Post School Universal (563)	S3 Enhanced (93)	S4-S6 Universal (804)	S4-S6 Targeted (2472)	S2/3 Options Choice (2059)
How effective or ineffective has the careers conversation been in helping you to make career decisions?	9.0	9.2	8.5	8.8	8.6	7.7
How likely or unlikely are you to recommend the careers conversation to others?	9.4	9.5	8.5	9.0	8.8	8.1
How satisfied or dissatisfied were you with the careers conversation?	9.5	9.6	9.1	9.3	9.2	8.7

### Apprentice Voice

SDS’ Evaluation and Research Team has developed an innovative approach to gathering apprentices’ views - Apprentice Voice (Real Time Apprentice Insights). All apprentices on FIPS (SDS financial payment system) are automatically given the opportunity to provide feedback on their apprenticeship at three key stages:

- In-training - six months after they start their apprenticeship
- Leavers - three months after they leave (whether they complete or not)
- Short-term outcomes – fifteen months after they leave (whether they complete or not)

Feedback is gathered from apprentices through an emailed questionnaire, followed a week later by a reminder email. Apprentice responses are matched with their anonymised data from FIPS (age, gender, framework) to support deeper analyses.

This new approach provides consistent and comparable evidence across all apprentices on FIPS at key stages in their apprenticeship. Since the system went live, nearly 30,000 responses from apprentices have been received.

The survey responses have been reweighted by gender, apprenticeship type and survey type to ensure that they are representative of the sample population.

For many apprentices who completed the surveys during 2023, they would have been in training while there were some COVID-19 restrictions in place which may have affected their employment and training, and subsequently their views on their experience.

### Sample sizes: 2023 weighted data

MA In training	4,192
MA Leavers	3,536
MA Short Term Outcomes	1,743

	MA In training	MA Leavers	MA Short term outcomes
Satisfaction (satisfied or very satisfied) <sup>1</sup>	94%	94%	91%
Likelihood to recommend (likely or very likely to recommend) <sup>1</sup>	94%	94%	93%
Report improvement in one meta-skill <sup>2</sup>	87%	81%	83%
Progressed in one area of personal development <sup>2</sup>	97%	97%	98%

<sup>1</sup> Percent of those selecting 6 and above on a 10-point scale

<sup>2</sup> Select all that apply multiple choice question

As outlined when I appeared before committee, we utilise this insight on a regular basis to continuously improve upon our service offer. Our drive for continuous improvement was recognised in 2021 when we were awarded [EFQM 7-star recognition](#). The award recognised our ability as an organisation to adapt quickly and efficiently in order to meet the needs of our customers.

### Data Sharing

In response to the question about our work with Scotland's 32 local authority areas, I highlighted the 16-plus Data Hub. I am therefore happy to provide further information on this.

By sharing information among key partners we provide tailored support to young people when they leave school, specifically those who are not moving on to learning or work. No matter where they are or end up, we want to work with partners to give them a safety net – and reduce youth unemployment at the same time.

We do this through the 16+ Data Hub, which is linking up the work going on across Scotland to help our young people find positive, sustained destinations after their secondary school education.

Data sharing forms a key pillar around the Opportunities for All policy agenda, which promises to offer training or education to every 16 to 19-year-old in Scotland as they move towards employment.

We want to ensure every young person has the opportunity to receive all the relevant support available to them. This approach includes providing regular contact with SDS careers advisers.

Having a complete set of data supplied by a range of partners enables front line staff to provide more effective, targeted support to those not in learning, training or employment and who are at risk of disengagement.

It is crucial that the right support is in place for this age group as they move through each transition in education, training or employment. Effective information sharing between partners allows for quick identification and engagement with any young person who has not secured a positive destination after school, who has failed to complete a course of learning/training or who is not in employment.

The 16+ Data Hub is a secure online portal which allows a range of partners including SDS to input to and access a combined database of information on individuals as outlined in the legislation requirements.

The 16+ data hub, which SDS delivers on behalf of the Scottish Government holds information on 16 to 24-year-olds that can be shared securely between partners, including Local Authorities, Colleges, the Scottish Funding Council, the Student Awards Agency for Scotland and the Department for Work and Pensions. The hub is the primary source for the Scottish Government's [Annual Participation Measure](#) which is the source of the national indicator for the percentage of young adults (16-19 year olds) participating in education, training or employment.

The details held in a central area include expected school leaving dates, where young people intend to go after school, whether this be into a job, Modern Apprenticeship, college or university, and information on those who are receiving career services and welfare benefits.

### **Support for neurodivergent individuals**

Finally, I was asked about work we are doing to support companies who employ neurodivergent people. SDS is active in a number of ways in our work to support neurodivergent individuals find training and employment.

Mr Stewart himself referred to [DFN Project SEARCH](#) - we have collaborated with them and created a guide for use by DFN Project SEARCH delivery organisations, National Training Providers and employers. [The guide](#), launched during Scottish Apprenticeship Week 2023, lays out the several reasons for both organisations to work together, including explaining the benefits that people with a learning disability, autism, or both, offer their employers.

SDS also provides CPD training to Learning Providers to support learners with ASN (Additional Support Needs) and disability, as well as signpost to other organisations for support. We also undertake Focal Point group calls with disability stakeholders across Scotland three times a year, to better understand barriers and consider interventions for disabled people. Additionally, SDS delivers the Scottish Government policy of an Enhanced Funding Contribution (EFC) to enable MA providers to offer additional support for disabled

people and/or those who are care experienced aged 20-29 on the Modern Apprenticeship Programme, when reasonable adjustments are required. See [Guidance Document](#).

Our fifth [Equality and Diversity Mainstreaming Report 2021-25](#), highlights the progress achieved against the four-year equality outcomes we set in 2017. It sets out examples of the ways in which we have worked, and continue to act, to promote and increase equality of opportunity for people in Scotland who face disadvantage because of their protected characteristics or lived experience. The report also looks forward and demonstrates how, through a wide range of policies, initiatives, and continuous improvement activities, we're working to embed equality and diversity throughout our organisation and meet our responsibilities as a public sector body.

Through interventions such as these, we hope to support employers and learning providers to increase the number of individuals, who are neurodivergent or otherwise identify as disabled, to access Modern Apprenticeships and other opportunities. In terms of National Training Programme participation, the [Modern Apprentice Statistics](#), published in May 2024, shows 17.0% of starts identified as disabled – the highest proportion ever reported – and 1.7 pp higher than last year.

The initiatives highlighted above, which we hope are contributing to greater take-up and awareness among neurodivergent individuals, are augmented on the SDS website by various case studies. Notably, Marc Ingram, the current Apprentice of the Year, has been showcased on our website for his achievement. Marc left Falkirk High at 15 with few qualifications because of his dyslexia and ADHD. But he applied for a Modern Apprenticeship in Food and Drink Operations (Butchery) through a school initiative. Working with a team of butchers at Blair Drummond Smiddy, Stirlingshire, helped him gain skills and competence in many aspects of the trade and he was this year named as Scotland's Apprentice of the Year. There is a case study about Marc on the [SDS website](#).

I was asked for examples of employers during the Committee session. In this regard, I hope it is helpful to provide a range of links to case studies on the SDS website of employers and neurodivergent individuals they employ who have been in training on an apprenticeship. I should add that we regularly highlight these to employers and providers via our communications channels and partnerships to hopefully encourage greater recruitment of neurodivergent individuals:

- SDS completed [a case study and webinar about Robert Dunbar](#), who has autism, but took up an apprenticeship in childcare and now works for Acorn Nursery in Glasgow.
- In a [parent webinar organised by SDS during Scottish Apprenticeship Week](#), one of the SME awards finalists, Icelantic in Edinburgh, spoke a lot about the number of candidates they get who are neurodiverse and the support which is provided for them. This is a focus during our campaigns. I have included the link to the webinar below should you wish for further information.
- [Alex Rutenbergs from Glasgow completed a Modern Apprenticeship](#) in Horticulture while working for Glasgow City Council.
- Glasgow-based Pointer Ltd, with their focus on enabling access to an apprenticeship opportunity for people, regardless of barriers to learning, was showcased in 2022.

Their work in supporting individuals with dyslexia was a particular focus [of this case study](#).

- [We have also celebrated Lewis Cassidy, who](#) started a Graduate Apprenticeship while working at Scottish Power.
- [Base Restaurant in Fife employed Shaun](#), who completed an SCQF Level 5 Modern Apprenticeship in Professional Cookery.
- A cross-directorate team from SDS created an [ASN webinar](#) attracting over 800 registrations and around 300 attendees. The session focussed on the needs of customers ensuring that the audience heard first-hand experiences from children with ASN, as well as apprentices with ASN. The panel session also featured a learning provider, teacher and SDS Careers Adviser to explain the support available across Foundation, Modern and Graduate Apprenticeships.

Turning to our other work in this area, at school level, SDS works closely with local schools to support young people with ASN and this is captured in our school partnership agreements and our close work with guidance/pastoral care to identify the young people who require more intensive support. We offer our support to transition planning and take an individual centred approach. Nationally, SDS has created a module for staff on principles of transitions and has had sessions with all Area Managers who were in the pilot areas for the principles. We also had a webinar in partnership with ARC for parents on transitions and our services. There are resources and guidance for staff on our staff intranet which continually evolves for supporting customers with ASN and disability, including autism and communication needs, learning difficulties and learning disability.

Specifically in the field of digital technology, I would like to make you aware that SDS has conducted research into neurodivergent individuals and the support they would need to take digital economy roles. In October 2020 we published the [Neurodiversity in Digital Technology report](#). With the launch of the [Digital Economy Skills Action plan](#) (DESAP) in March 2023, this work continues, to ensure we focus on equality, diversity and inclusion in the development and implementation of DESAP, and we will be forming an Equality Diversity and Inclusion Advisory board including key stakeholders to assist in guiding our work.

Finally, we hope it will be of interest to learn of one other area of our work in this regard. SDS has a sponsored PhD programme which it runs in conjunction with the Scottish Graduate School of Social Sciences (SGSSS). This provides academic insight and rigour to understanding core issues in the careers and skills landscapes. It also supports the development of a cadre of new researchers who understand the Scottish skills system. The collaborative PhD programme was described by the Economic and Social Research Council as a '*model of collaborative good practice*'.

[SDS collaborative PhD student, Martina Lippi](#), is researching how to support the career pathways of neurodivergent young people. More details on the PhD programme, and Martina's work in this field, can be found at: <https://www.skillsdevelopmentscotland.co.uk/media/waifud4y/phd-brochure.pdf>

We would be delighted to provide the Committee with further information, or to meet again with any members who may wish to do so.

I hope this information is useful to the Committee. Please contact us at [corporate.affairs@sds.co.uk](mailto:corporate.affairs@sds.co.uk) if you have any questions.

Kind regards

**Dave McCallum** Head of CIAG Operations