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A children's ward at a key central Scotland hospital could be five years away from reopening – despite SNP pledges that it would return to full service back in October.

The paediatric unit at St John's hospital in Livingston – which is meant to be running 24/7 – reduced its hours in the summer of 2017 due to staff shortages.

Since then, the SNP government has repeatedly pledged action, and was meant to get the facility back to full operation in October, only for it to be put on ice again.

Now Scottish Conservative research has revealed it may not fully reopen until 2024.

Freedom of Information documents have shown the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health told NHS Lothian about the lengthy delays back in August, a month before health secretary Jeane Freeman admitted to MSPs the unit would not open on time.

Minutes from a health board meeting state “the commitment for the Paediatric Programme Board is to open the ward 24/7” but NHS Lothian “had been advised by the RCPCH that this would take 3-5 years to achieve”.

Since the downgrade in services, the unit has only opened from Monday-to-Thursday, and thousands of children have been instead forced to travel to the Sick Kids hospital in Edinburgh.

Scottish Conservative shadow health secretary Miles Briggs said:

“The SNP is failing sick children and their families right across the country.

“It's bad enough that the flagship paediatric hospital in Edinburgh has been delayed for almost a decade on its watch, but now we learn there are major delays in West Lothian too.

“For more than two years a key children's unit – which has historically

served young patients on a 24/7 basis – has been downgraded.

“Jeane Freeman promised this would be sorted by October, only to admit that wasn’t happening, and now we learn a full reopening could be five years away.

“That’s a complete disgrace. The SNP has been in full charge of health in Scotland since 2007, and only has itself to blame for this mess.

“The nationalists have let down generations of ill youngsters, their families, and the dedicated staff who treat them.”