

Conveners Group
Meeting with the First Minister
Wednesday 18 September 2024

Transcript prepared by the Scottish Parliament Official Report

Wednesday 18 September 2024

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CONVENERS GROUP

2nd Meeting 2024, Session 6

CONVENER

*Liam McArthur (The Deputy Presiding Officer)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Karen Adam (Convener, Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee)
*Clare Adamson (Convener, Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee)
*Claire Baker (Convener, Economy and Fair Work Committee)
*Ariane Burgess (Convener, Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee)
Jackson Carlaw (Convener, Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee)
*Finlay Carson (Convener, Rural Affairs and Islands Committee)
*Kenneth Gibson (Convener, Finance and Public Administration Committee)
*Clare Haughey (Convener, Health, Social Care and Sport Committee)
*Richard Leonard (Convener, Public Audit Committee)
*Stuart McMillan (Convener, Delegated Powers and Law Reform Committee)
*Edward Mountain (Convener, Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee)
*Audrey Nicoll (Convener, Criminal Justice Committee)
*Collette Stevenson (Convener, Social Justice and Social Security Committee)
*Sue Webber (Convener, Education, Children and Young People Committee)
*Martin Whitfield (Convener, Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

John Swinney (The First Minister)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Sigrid Robinson

LOCATION

The Mary Fairfax Somerville Room (CR2)

Scottish Parliament

Conveners Group

Wednesday 18 September 2024

[The Deputy Presiding Officer opened the meeting at 12:04]

Issues for All Committees

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): Good afternoon, and welcome to this meeting of the Conveners Group. I have received apologies from Jackson Carlaw. I am aware that a number of committee meetings are on-going, so we will be joined by three or four of our colleagues during the course of our meeting. The meeting is taking place in public and, therefore, the microphones will be activated and deactivated automatically.

Agenda item 1 is a meeting with the First Minister. I welcome the First Minister to his first meeting with the Conveners Group. Today's meeting will take about an hour and a half, and we have agreed that it will focus on the Scottish Government's programme for government. However, as always, conveners might wish to raise more general issues. I hope that we will have time to enable them to do so, but that will require, as far as possible, brevity in the questions and, indeed, in the responses. I will try to bring in colleagues on the areas that they have indicated that they want to ask about, but there might be those who wish to respond to what has been said. Again, we will try to accommodate that as far as possible.

Before turning to the programme for government, we will start with questions broadly about changes to the ministerial code that are relevant to committees more generally. I invite Martin Whitfield to kick off on behalf of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee.

Ministerial Code (Independent Advisers)

Martin Whitfield (Convener, Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee): Good afternoon, First Minister. In your statement to the Parliament on 4 September, you outlined planned changes to the ministerial code. You said:

"I want my Government to set the highest standard of propriety and integrity, and I want trust to be at the heart of our relationship with the people of Scotland."—*[Official Report, 4 September 2024; c 33.]*

A fair and transparent process in relation to standards is, obviously, of great interest to the SPPA Committee, so I am keen to hear more about your thinking in that area. Could you expand on the extent to which you consider that independent advisers on the code should be able to launch their own investigations? Will that increase public trust in the code?

The First Minister (John Swinney): One of the alterations to the code that I intend to make is that independent advisers will be free—without any reference to me, as the First Minister and the custodian of the code—to embark on any investigations that they consider to be appropriate. My rationale for that is—this addresses the second part of Mr Whitfield's question—to boost public confidence and trust in the exercise of the code by giving the advisers the scope to exercise their judgment. It would be a matter for the independent advisers to judge for themselves whether it was appropriate to investigate or to pursue any issues that were put to them by an individual.

Martin Whitfield: Can I take it from that answer that the advisers could launch such investigations without needing to inform you or, indeed, needing to have your consent?

The First Minister: They would not require my consent, but, as a basic matter of appropriateness, I would have to be advised, because I would generally need to know if anything relating to the conduct of one of my ministers was being looked at. After all, I am responsible for the appointment of ministers, though those appointments are also subject to approval by the Parliament. I would require to be informed of any investigation, but my consent would not be required.

Martin Whitfield: That is very helpful. You have said that the terms of reference will be updated. Will those be published? How far will they extend beyond where they are at the moment?

The First Minister: The terms of reference will be published. I am exploring their content and scope to ensure that they fulfil my objective, which is to build public confidence in the requirement of the ministerial team to meet high standards.

Martin Whitfield: An interesting element is that the independent advisers will be involved in advising you on appropriate sanctions. Will that form part of the code? What information do you have on the extent of the sanctions on which you could be advised?

The First Minister: That issue is being explored, and a range of sanctions are available in any circumstance, on any issue. A breach of the ministerial code is perceived almost as requiring a minister to instantaneously resign, although that has not been the case in other jurisdictions. It is important that the process is more obvious and

more codified than it is just now, because the public perception is generally that, if there is a breach of the ministerial code, the minister must resign. Obviously, a misconduct process can deal with varying degrees of a breach of the code, from the minor to the very serious. It is important that that is better codified, so that we all know where we stand.

Intergovernmental Relations

Clare Adamson (Convener, Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee): Good afternoon, First Minister. The new UK Government has committed to resetting its relationship with devolved Governments. A constant theme of our committee's work has been the tensions between Governments and the strain on devolution, as evidenced by the lack of adherence to the Sewel convention, which has been raised by the House of Lords and the Senedd. What are your priorities for the resetting of that relationship, what progress has been made, and what might that mean for this Parliament, particularly with regard to conveners' scrutiny responsibilities?

The First Minister: That is a very important issue, and I welcome the fact that the Prime Minister has made it clear, publicly and privately, that he wants to reset the relationship between the United Kingdom Government and the devolved Governments. That is not just about Scotland; it is also about Wales and Northern Ireland. The concerns that I, my predecessors and Scottish ministers have expressed are the same concerns that have been expressed by First Ministers of Wales—prominently by Mark Drakeford, who was very clear and open about his concerns about the quality of intergovernmental relations.

As Ms Adamson will know, I have been around a long time, and I have seen many years of pretty good intergovernmental relationships with the Brown Government, the Cameron-Clegg Government, the Cameron Government and even the Theresa May Government, although that relationship was very tested over Brexit. The relationship has been appalling since Boris Johnson became Prime Minister, so I really welcome what Keir Starmer said about the need to reset it.

The reset can happen at different levels. There is the day-to-day operational interaction, where, I have to say, there has been a lot of good substantive interaction between Scottish and UK ministers since the election. We might come on to talk about Grangemouth today, and there has been extensive involvement on that issue. That interaction has taken its course. There is an issue about the degree of visibility of that to committees, but I want to try to preserve some of that

interaction in a private Government-to-Government space, because it might be better all round if we make some headway. However, I understand that there are transparency issues, which committees will be concerned about.

There are also the more formal aspects of relationships. The Prime Minister has made it clear that he intends to form what I think will be called the council of the nations. We do not know very much about that, and we are awaiting further dialogue and discussion about it. Obviously, quite a lot of intergovernmental machinery was put in place that predates this Government. I would not say that I attach a vast amount of confidence to those existing arrangements, but it is to be hoped that the combination of the informal and formal is more beneficial.

Timetabling (Prison Population)

Audrey Nicoll (Convener, Criminal Justice Committee): As of mid-September, the prison population was approaching 8,200, even after the early release scheme that ran over the summer, with the release of nearly 480 prisoners. If that had not been done, we might now have had nearly 8,700 prisoners in Scotland, compared with a target operating capacity of just over 8,000. What more does the First Minister believe needs to be done to reduce the prison population in the short term? Does he share my view that, should we find ourselves facing a future release process, the notification and safety of victims should be a priority?

12:15

The First Minister: On the last point, yes, I do. Engagement with victims is crucial in all of this, and I know that that issue is very important to members of the Criminal Justice Committee. Having served on the committee prior to my appointment as First Minister, I know the depth of scrutiny that has been undertaken on victims issues, so I recognise and acknowledge their importance.

In relation to the prison population in general, we are obviously facing a very serious situation. I observed quite a lot of the engagement with the Parliament on this question from the back benches, and I have to say that I thought that the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs handled the communication and engagement with the Parliament perfectly and properly. It was really important that members were briefed many months before we reached a crisis point about the ascending level of concern, because, on questions of this type, the Parliament must be engaged.

The first meeting that I had when I became First Minister, other than a meeting of the Cabinet, was a meeting to discuss the prison population with the

justice secretary and the chief executive of the Scottish Prison Service. That perhaps tells the Conveners Group the severity and seriousness of the situation. I was insistent that we could not embark on changing the release arrangements without the consent of the Parliament. It is of that significance—the Parliament must be engaged in that process.

We still face a serious situation, and I fully expect the justice secretary to have to come back to the Parliament to brief members about the current situation, because, although the release of 477 prisoners during June and July as part of the release scheme has helped, it has not solved the situation. I suspect that that will come back to the Parliament in due course. We are considering the options that are available in that regard.

There is a strategic point about the level of incarceration in Scotland. We are a country that has, comparatively speaking, a higher incarceration level per head of population. I am keen that the Government further explores the alternatives to custody that we have available, because we all know that prison is not the answer to many of the challenging situations that we face. We are actively exploring those questions in relation to alternatives to custody per se, as well as in circumstances where the courts judge that remand arrangements should be put in place, because the remand population just now is about 27 per cent of the total prison population.

Audrey Nicoll: Could I ask a follow-up question, Deputy Presiding Officer?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Yes.

Audrey Nicoll: Thank you, and I thank the First Minister for that very helpful answer.

On the final points that you made, about alternative options to custody, First Minister, I want to ask about plans over the medium and longer terms to address the problem of the number of people who are sent to prison. That touches on what you have already outlined, but could you expand a little bit on the Government's thinking in that area? You covered the independent review of sentencing and penal policy. What plans are there around that?

The First Minister: There is a strategic debate that we need to have, and I am very keen that we have it. We took fairly significant action in releasing 477 prisoners early, but, as I said a moment ago, that has not solved the problem. There is a strategic question to be explored. There are many good examples of alternatives to custody, and I have to accept that, for a member of the judiciary to utilise one of those alternatives, they must be available and they must command judicial confidence that they are effective. Those two things might not always be available.

There is work to be done to ensure that a greater set of options are available in order to avoid incarceration, because we know from all the evidence—which the Justice Committee will be familiar with—that prison does not always deliver good outcomes.

Government Transparency (Record Keeping)

Richard Leonard (Convener, Public Audit Committee): Last year, following our inquiry into the MV Glen Sannox and MV Glen Rosa contract, the Public Audit Committee made a series of recommendations on greater transparency, better record keeping and the contemporaneous public recording of shareholder authorisations in the same way as written authorisations by ministers are recorded. Will you amend the Scottish public finance manual to reflect that?

The First Minister: I will certainly look at that particular issue, and I understand its significance. Perhaps I can give a general response about the recording of decisions, including material decisions. The Public Audit Committee has advanced a number of important points in that regard, and many of those questions have also been advanced in consideration of some of the early output of the Covid public inquiries. Indeed, it is often a feature of external inquiries that the recording of material points of decision making is perhaps not as strong as it should be.

As Mr Leonard will know, I was out of Government for a year. Since I have come back into it, I have seen a much sharper focus on the recording of decision making. I can literally see in the layout of Government emails what constitutes a decision—that is now an identifiable part of the recording systems in the Scottish Government. Over the past couple of years, there has been a focus on strengthening that, but I will give consideration to the specific point that Mr Leonard puts to me.

Richard Leonard: I wonder whether I can help the First Minister. Such a procedure as the one that we recommended has now been written into the framework agreement between the Scottish Government and Ferguson Marine (Port Glasgow) Ltd. Will that now become standard practice for future framework agreements between the Scottish Government and bodies that are wholly owned by the Scottish ministers?

The First Minister: Mr Leonard is being very helpful to me. It sounds like a good idea, so let me take that away and look at it.

Richard Leonard: I have one final brief question. We understand from correspondence received from the Deputy First Minister that the permanent secretary is carrying out what the

former describes as a “transparency review”. Will you tell us a little bit more about the scope of that?

The First Minister: Essentially, that exercise is looking at some of the ground that I have covered already—the recording of decisions. External work is being done on the recording of communications, because, as the Covid inquiry has aired, there is some uncertainty about how much information should be retained by the Government system.

As Mr Leonard will appreciate, there is an absolutely colossal amount of information traffic within Government as positions are developed and issues are explored. Ultimately, that might lead to a decision being taken. In my view, the recording of that decision has got to be absolutely crystal clear—the basis on which it was taken, when it was taken, who took it and what the understanding of the decision was. All those things are central.

There is a wider debate about whether we need to see every dot and comma of the journey to get there. I can assure the Conveners Group that the journey to get there is pretty torturous. There are a lot of transactions on that journey. Do we need to retain every transaction? That would make the systems almost impenetrable. Those issues are being explored in that exercise.

Also, the Government publishes a vast amount of information, and I am very much of the view that we should be open to our having in place a helpful publication scheme to ensure that the needs of interested parties are properly addressed and that the Government is transparent about its dealings with members of the public.

Review of Commissioner Landscape

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I invite Kenneth Gibson, on behalf of the Finance and Public Administration Committee, to segue after this question from this section to the programme for government.

Kenneth Gibson (Convener, Finance and Public Administration Committee): Indeed. On Monday, the Finance and Public Administration Committee published its “Report on Scotland’s Commissioner Landscape: A Strategic Approach”, which calls for a moratorium on the creation of new Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body-supported bodies while a root-and-branch review of the structure in which those bodies sit is carried out. Implementing the committee’s findings would be a collective endeavour requiring the support of the Government, the SPCB, committees, individual members and, indeed, the Conveners Group. Does the First Minister have any immediate response to that report? If so, can he confirm that the committee will have the Scottish Government’s full support in implementing a moratorium?

The First Minister: Obviously I am familiar with the work that the committee has been undertaking in this area, and I can see the degree of focus and industry that it has applied to the question.

I think that Mr Gibson is absolutely correct that this is a collective endeavour. It is not just about the Government’s perspective; it spans the Parliament, because Parliament itself has created a number of the commissioners’ offices. Moreover, there are a number of proposals to establish commissioners from members of Parliament through members’ bills that are currently before Parliament, and some of those proposals are therefore not within the Government’s control.

The Government has a commitment in the Victims, Witnesses, and Justice Reform (Scotland) Bill, which is currently being considered by the Criminal Justice Committee, to establish a victims and witnesses commissioner. That is part of that legislative process.

I am very happy for the Government to engage with Parliament on the question, but I view it very much as a matter for Parliament, because often the commissioners are appointed to challenge the Government. Therefore, on the question whether the Government should be part of deciding whether a commissioner should carry on, I am not sure that that is the right place for the Government to be. That said, I certainly give the commitment that, if there were any engagement that the Parliament wished to have with the Government on the issue, we would engage constructively on that basis.

Kenneth Gibson: Given that the committee’s findings showed an

“absence of a clear and coherent framework underpinning ... the ... landscape”,

resulting in overlap, confusion and “a disjointed landscape”, will the Scottish Government pause its plans and support the Parliament’s call for a fundamental review to be completed by next summer?

The First Minister: I would have to consider that point, because we have a legislative proposal going through Parliament just now on the victims and witnesses commissioner. If my memory serves me right, that part of the bill was, I think, supported by all members of the committee—I cannot quite recall whether I am 100 per cent correct in saying that. I will take the point away, but I assure Mr Gibson that, if Parliament wishes to take forward such a process, the Government will co-operate fully in that endeavour.

Kenneth Gibson: Thank you for that.

Programme for Government (Economy)

Use of One-off Funding

12:28

Kenneth Gibson: With regard to issues relating to the economy, the Finance and Public Administration Committee is carrying out pre-budget scrutiny on a strategic approach to managing Scotland's public finances. The Scottish Government's decision to commit the £460 million remaining from ScotWind to this year's budget means that there is an immediate £460 million hole in next year's budget if that money is fully deployed. How is that being addressed, and how does the Scottish Government reconcile its use of one-off funds to address budgetary shortfalls with ensuring a much more strategic approach to managing Scotland's public finances?

The First Minister: The challenge that we face this year is very acute, because of two factors. The first is the cumulative effect of the significant levels of inflation that we have experienced over the past three years. As the finance secretary explained to Parliament in the first week after the summer recess, the three-year effect of inflation has been of the order of 18 per cent, which has essentially eroded our budget. As the new chancellor explained to the House of Commons at the end of July, there had been no resetting of budgets to take account of inflationary pressures, so, essentially, the value of the budget has been eroded over a three-year period by 18 per cent. When we compare that with trend inflation, which we would expect to be 2 per cent per annum, we see that it represents a very significant erosion of the budget. That is one factor that is creating the financial strain that we are experiencing just now.

12:30

Secondly, in order to avoid industrial action, we are having to invest more in pay deals than we had anticipated when setting the budget.

Those two factors are creating significant financial strain, and they are the source of the one-off pressure that we are experiencing.

I am doing all that I can, working with the finance secretary, to try to avoid our using the ScotWind funding to support general public expenditure, but I cannot rule that out at this stage because of the intense pressure on the budget. If, for example, we got to the end of the financial year with an overspend, and we had not used the ScotWind money and tried to make a reserve claim, I am pretty sure that the UK Government would say to us, "But you've got the ScotWind

money." Under the financial rules, we would have to have recourse to that before making a reserve claim. However, I assure Mr Gibson that the Government is trying to avoid utilising those resources.

Looking forward to 2025-26, I would say that the answer to Mr Gibson's question comes with the setting of a budget that is robust and able to withstand the in-year shocks that we are facing. That is very much a priority for me in the preparations and planning for the 2025-26 budget.

Public Sector Pay Settlements

Kenneth Gibson: Scotland's 548,000 public sector workers earn, on average, £2,400 a year more than their counterparts down south—or some £1,500, net of tax—while low-paid workers enjoy an even greater differential. The impact on the Scottish budget of that generosity is more than £1.3 billion this year. Given that Scotland's public sector comprises more than 22 per cent of the workforce, compared with 17 per cent in England, are more generous pay settlements in Scotland sustainable?

The First Minister: We have to meet our obligations to our workforce. There is, of course, a positive economic impact of those salaries on the Scottish economy as a consequence of the pay rates that have been agreed.

However, Mr Gibson's fundamental question is a valid one. The budget has to be sustainable; indeed, I go back to my answer to his previous question about the formulation of the 2025-26 budget. It will have to be robust to cope with any fiscal shocks that we might face in that period.

Public Sector Reform

Kenneth Gibson: My final question is on the public sector.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You are going to have to be very brief.

Kenneth Gibson: It is a brief question.

How will the Scottish Government enable meaningful public sector reform, given that there appears to be a lack of specifics regarding vision, resource capacity and a timescale for delivery, either in part or in its entirety?

The First Minister: I would contend that the Government has done quite a lot of public sector reform over its time, some of which has not been universally applauded. Police Scotland and the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service are two examples.

The Government has a focused agenda. In the programme for government, I set out what I consider to be a significant element of public

sector reform with regard to the construction of whole-family support. In any case, I think that we have to be careful about how we define public sector reform. Often, people think that such reform is about revising and amending public bodies, but it can be about how we deliver services, too. There is a huge amount of public sector reform there.

That is what my aspirations are for whole-family support. I see very good examples around the country of revisions to the delivery of services that deliver much better outcomes for individuals and ensure much more effective utilisation of public finances. The problem is that that is not systemic. It is happening in different localities or in different sectors. The Government's focus in the programme for government is on trying to make much more of it systemic, so that we improve the public finance challenge and the delivery of public services to better meet the needs of families, particularly in the field of child poverty.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The number of questions there was on the same trajectory as the number of commissioners, Mr Gibson.

I call Claire Baker, on behalf of the Economy and Fair Work Committee.

National Strategy for Economic Transformation

Claire Baker (Convener, Economy and Fair Work Committee): Part of the work of the Economy and Fair Work Committee is scrutiny of the national strategy for economic transformation, which is now due for a refresh. It is difficult to scrutinise it when we are waiting on the refresh—and we have been waiting on it for a wee while. Will the First Minister let us know when the refresh can be expected? What are the reasons for the refresh, given that the strategy has been in place for two years?

The First Minister: As I understand it, the Deputy First Minister has chosen not to refresh the strategy but to focus on its delivery. That is my understanding of the position, although I might want to revisit that in light of the question and the quizzical look that I am getting from Claire Baker.

Claire Baker: Yes. I do not think that we have had an update on that, but I can check.

The First Minister: Interesting.

Claire Baker: My understanding is that we are still waiting on a refresh.

The First Minister: I suppose that the best answer that I can give is that the Deputy First Minister is co-chairing the NSET board with Barry White. We were both in dialogue with him on Monday. NSET remains the economic strategy for

the Government, and the Deputy First Minister is absolutely focused on delivering stronger economic performance for Scotland. That is where the focus of policy making is just now.

I am now feeling sufficiently uneasy about whether we are on for a refresh or not, so I will reserve my position on that, if the Conveners Group will forgive me. However, I can assure Claire Baker that the Deputy First Minister is directly focused on strengthening our economic performance.

Claire Baker: The Deputy First Minister is due to appear in front of us in a few weeks, so we will clarify the position then.

The First Minister: You will get a far higher quality of answer than the First Minister has just offered.

Child Poverty (Arrestments)

Claire Baker: I want to highlight another area. In the programme for government, you focused on child poverty. The committee recently did scrutiny work on the Bankruptcy and Diligence (Scotland) Bill. As part of that, we proposed to increase the amount that is protected in earnings arrestment, which the Social Justice and Social Security Committee also requested in its report "Robbing Peter to pay Paul: Low income and the debt trap". At the time, the Government said that the bill was not the right vehicle for doing that. However, it has not committed to doing it. In previous legislation, we increased the amount that was protected in bank arrestments, but earnings have been left at a lower level. Is the Government prepared to take forward work on that?

You might know that representatives of Aberlour and the Govan Law Centre were in the Parliament last week, and they have done work in the First Minister's constituency and region on debt issues for families who are living in poverty. Although the child payment is putting money in at one end, if debt is making it difficult for people to have a good income, the Government needs to address that. Are there plans to address it?

The First Minister: I am very interested in that point. As I hope the conveners will take from the programme for government, we are approaching tackling the child poverty problem from the perspective that there are a multiplicity of routes. It is a complex issue, so we have to make sure that actions of the type that Claire Baker puts to me do not have unintended consequences. For example, we could be doing a good thing on the one hand with the Scottish child payment, but if we do not have the right arrangements in place for finance retention in a debt situation, it might not be having as much effect as it could have.

I am open to exploring those questions to make sure that we have in place the right approach that best meets the needs of families in need of support. The key test for me is the retention of income within families. During Covid, I learned some important lessons about the best means of supporting families who are in difficulty. One of the key measures was about getting control of money into households, so that they had money that they controlled in accordance with their needs, as opposed to the Government, for example, stipulating that people could use vouchers in a shop for food and so on.

That was one of the means adopted during Covid, but I was totally persuaded by the cash-first model as a way to give families more control. The evidence of what that model does in terms of decision making, reducing tension in households, improving effectiveness and meeting the needs of households was really strong. Some of that could be challenged if the type of circumstances that Claire Baker puts to me prevail. However, I would be very happy to explore that.

Grangemouth (Just Transition)

Claire Baker: The Economy and Fair Work Committee did an inquiry into a just transition for the Grangemouth area. That was prior to the announcement on the oil refinery closure. The Government is due to bring forward a plan on a just transition for Grangemouth. I hope that that plan is still coming, and that it is not one that has been changed as we—

The First Minister: A huge amount of urgent work is under way on Grangemouth. Work has been going on for some time. The committee will have been briefed about that, but ministers would be happy to come to the committee to explain further.

The work to address the situation in Grangemouth and to ensure that we have in place the most effective approaches will be the highest priority for the Government.

Claire Baker: Other members might wish to raise the issue of Grangemouth.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: As no colleague wants to come in at this stage, I will pass on to Clare Adamson to pursue the next line of questioning.

Programme for Government (Constitution)

12:41

Culture Sector (Funding)

Clare Adamson: First Minister, it was announced in the programme for government that there will be a review of Creative Scotland and an examination of how to maximise the overall impact of the planned increases in levels of public funding for the culture sector. The Constitution, Europe, External Affairs Committee's evidence and engagement with the sector reveals that it is looking for the Government to show confidence in it.

I am sure that you remember the phrase "perfect storm" being used in reference to the previous budget for the culture sector. Can you give us any information about the scope or the framework of the review? How will it deliver that confidence? What is the detail on how the commitment of £100 million annually for the culture sector by 2028-29 will be delivered?

The First Minister: The delivery of those resources is part of the Government's budget process. Each budget will demonstrate the progress that we are making in that respect. Some progress has already been made, and we aim to make more.

You asked about the review of Creative Scotland. The first thing that I want to say is that I attach the highest importance to having a vibrant and well-supported culture sector in Scotland. I would not want anyone to have any sense that I take any other view. The culture sector is a jewel in our crown and it needs to be supported. I want to make sure that we have the institutional arrangements, and that the focus of institutional arrangements is corrected, to enable that to be the case.

I know that the committee that Clare Adamson chairs, and she will know from her engagement with the sector, will know that people are concerned about a lot of issues. I want the sector to feel as well supported as possible. That will be the approach that the Government takes. We will take financial decisions to try to reinforce that, as well.

The convener of the Finance and Public Administration Committee is sitting here: he knows thoroughly the challenges that we face in relation to public finances. There are challenges, but I am struck by the fact that the beneficial impact on the mood, morale and joy of our population is significantly affected by the vibrancy of our culture

sector. I want to do everything that we can do to support that.

As the Deputy Presiding Officer is chairing the meeting, I will use this as an opportunity to highlight one of my experiences at the Edinburgh international festival. I attended a performance of “The Outrun” at the Churchill theatre. The play combined the Royal Lyceum Theatre Company with the National Theatre of Scotland and involved an outreach project including Kirkwall grammar school, which is in the Deputy Presiding Officer’s constituency, and young actors from the Royal Lyceum.

It was an utterly motivating example of cultural exchange between young people from Orkney and young people from in and around the city of Edinburgh. Those young people produced extraordinary work, but at the heart of it was an initiative by Edinburgh International Festival to create a platform that could bring together those young people from Orkney and Edinburgh. It was utterly stimulating on tough subjects. I came away from the performance greatly motivated by what I had experienced. I certainly would not want it to be suspected that the First Minister is never moved by such great pieces of work.

Trade and Co-operation Agreement

12:45

Clare Adamson: I have a second question, which is on another area of responsibility for the committee. We recently published our report on the review of the trade and co-operation agreement, with a number of recommendations. The programme for government includes a commitment to support negotiations around the UK-European Union veterinary agreement. Our evidence on that was stark with regard to the impact of Brexit on, in particular, food producers. What are your expectations of the Scottish Government’s involvement in that negotiation process? How can you influence that process? Will there be any role for stakeholders leading up to the review?

The First Minister: Obviously, the trade and co-operation agreement is an agreement between the United Kingdom and the European Union. To go back to the questions that Clare Adamson put to me earlier, the process will be an interesting example of whether there is any material change in the relationships between the devolved Governments and the UK Government. The agreement is a perfect example of where, I believe, we should be more involved. The involvement of Scotland in the TCA will have been perfunctory—of that I am certain—and that has to stop. As Clare Adamson has rightly put to me, producers and businesses in Scotland will suffer

enormously because of the implications of the TCA, and her committee has heard evidence on that.

I very much welcome the committee’s focus on the trade and co-operation agreement. In my view, the arrangements are totally deficient. Businesses and economic opportunities in Scotland are being weakened as a consequence of it. I am keen to ensure that there is much greater participation for Scotland and the Scottish Government in interaction with the United Kingdom Government. Should we have that position, I would want it to be informed by engagement with stakeholders.

Clare Adamson: Thank you.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The First Minister is right that longer answers are more likely to be tolerated if they include positive anecdotes about Orkney.

The First Minister: I made a careful judgment about that point, Deputy Presiding Officer.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Yes, but you are rubbing it in that you have managed to see “The Outrun”, when I have had to knock back two invitations already.

The First Minister: If I can just add to your woe, I will say that it was unmissable.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I think that I have managed to disprove that, having missed it twice, now. Anyway, the next line of questioning is from Audrey Nicoll.

Programme for Government (Justice)

12:47

Proposed Criminal Justice Modernisation and Abusive Domestic Behaviour Reviews Bill

Audrey Nicoll: The programme for government outlined the Government's proposals around a criminal justice modernisation and abusive domestic behaviour reviews bill. That dual-purpose bill will, as the name suggests, make permanent some of the temporary justice measures that were introduced during the Covid-19 pandemic. It will also provide a legislative framework for Scotland's first national domestic homicide and suicide review model. Can the First Minister say a bit more about the proposals—in particular, those regarding the domestic homicide and suicide review?

The First Minister: The bill will look to define the scope of the model, delineate the review process and the reporting requirements, and ensure necessary participation in the model. The bill represents recognition of the need to be constantly attentive to ensuring that our criminal justice system addresses the circumstances that people are having to experience in our society, and to ensuring that due account is taken of that. That has been the focus of the engagement around the bill for putting the provisions in place.

Audrey Nicoll: Thank you.

Programme for Government (Environment)

12:49

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We turn to Stuart McMillan, on behalf of the Delegated Powers and Law Reform Committee.

Climate Change (Emissions Reduction Targets) (Scotland) Bill (Delegated Powers)

Stuart McMillan (Convener, Delegated Powers and Law Reform Committee): Last week, the Delegated Powers and Law Reform Committee considered the delegated powers in the Climate Change (Emissions Reduction Targets) (Scotland) Bill. The delegated powers are central to the bill, as they will be used to set the carbon budget targets. The acting Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero and Energy has replied to the committee's questions, and those views will be considered in due course by the lead committee. However, it would be helpful if you could set out the rationale for the approach that the Government has chosen, which involves using delegated powers to set fundamental aspects of what the bill does, rather than setting out those aspects in the bill.

The First Minister: The most appropriate answer is to say that that approach is necessary in order to deal with the timing challenges that we face. Mr McMillan will know that the bill is necessary because later in November we will, if we do not legislate, be in a situation in which we will not be acting within the legal framework, and ministers and the Government must act within the law. That is why we have had to take the very difficult decision to come to Parliament with the bill.

In relation to the point that Mr McMillan has put to me, the carbon budgets will be set on the basis of expert advice from the Climate Change Committee. However, because that advice will not be available until the spring of 2025, we face the prospect of not acting within our legal framework later this year. The use of delegated powers is a mechanism that will enable us to resolve the legal dilemma that we face while still putting in place statutory force to address the climate change targets. Through the mechanism that we have adopted, we have sought to ensure that the strongest possible scrutiny of that framework will be applied when the regulations come to Parliament.

Stuart McMillan: Thank you.

Programme for Government (Health)

12:52

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We now move on to the health portfolio, on which Clare Haughey will ask questions on behalf of the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee.

National Health Service (Waiting Times)

Clare Haughey (Convener, Health, Social Care and Sport Committee): I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests: I hold a bank nurse contract with NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde.

On many occasions in the committee's work and in our casework as MSPs we have heard concerns from clinicians, stakeholders and individuals about on-going backlogs and waiting times, in the post-Covid context. Reduction of those waiting times is a priority for all of us. Will you explain how the funding that is set out in the programme for government will help to reduce waits for treatment across a range of specialties? I am thinking about orthopaedics, cancer and general surgery, in particular.

The First Minister: The issue of backlogs and waiting times is a significant one. I recognise that from my constituency case load and from the issues that members bring to me and raise with me in our more formal dialogue.

The investment that the Government has set out is focused on reducing those waiting times, and health boards have been directed to undertake that approach. As a consequence of the investment that is available in the programme for government, we are freeing up more than 200,000 planned-care out-patient appointments through the centre for sustainable delivery's programmes, which are helping to reduce some of the backlogs. Capacity is also being expanded in relation to out-patient appointments, in-patient and day-care procedures, and diagnostic procedures.

On cancer care, there are very serious issues, so we are focusing on maximising the number of cases that are handled within the timescales that are set down for cancer care. In some cases, that is a challenge, but in most cases the standards can be fulfilled. We need to ensure that we have in place the necessary capacity to do all that.

The challenges, with which Clare Haughey will be familiar, relate quite simply to the creation of the necessary capacity to enable that, so it is about availability of staff and clinical leadership to undertake the work. However, the focus of the

efforts that are being taken forward by health boards is very much on improving performance.

Clare Haughey: I want to move on to primary care investment, which the committee has looked at in relation to a recent inquiry into remote and rural services. It is a key policy objective for the Scottish Government in shifting the balance of care to preventative and community-based support. Evidently, investment in primary care relieves pressure on our health and social care sector. Can you outline the work that the Scottish Government has committed to through the programme for government to increase capacity and access to primary care in order to help with that preventative agenda?

The First Minister: One of the measures that we are taking is deployment of the primary care improvement fund in this financial year, which is an investment of £198 million. That fund is designed to expand the primary care multidisciplinary workforce, particularly in physiotherapy, pharmacy and phlebotomy. The creation of those teams to maximise early intervention is judged to be one of the ways in which we can address Clare Haughey's more strategic question about the reduction in the number of patients who are waiting for treatment to be undertaken. Earlier intervention with physiotherapy support can avoid the need for orthopaedic surgery, which is a more complex, higher-risk and more expensive process and procedure, which has implications for the health service. In essence, the emphasis on expanding the primary care multidisciplinary teams is judged to be the most effective way in which to take forward that activity.

Programme for Government (Children)

12:57

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I will now hand over to Sue Webber, on behalf of the Education, Children and Young People's Committee.

Education Reform

Sue Webber (Convener, Education, Children and Young People Committee): First Minister, setting aside the fact that we have a ministerial statement tomorrow on education reform, we have the Education (Scotland) Bill, there will be legislative proposals this year for post-school education reform and the Scottish Government is considering many other aspects of education reform. However, we still do not have a clear picture of exactly what is changing and when those changes might take place, perhaps particularly in relation to the Hayward review. Can the First Minister outline when teachers and learners, and the committee, can expect to see changes in curriculum development and assessment?

The First Minister: Curriculum development and assessment are two different issues. If Sue Webber will forgive me, I shall err on the side of caution in not saying too much about assessment, because there is a parliamentary statement on that tomorrow. Although I am sitting in Parliament today, I should probably keep myself on the right side of the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills by not disclosing the contents of that statement.

Curriculum development is an on-going priority, and there has been a particular focus, as an early priority, on development of the maths curriculum, in recognition of its significance. Education Scotland leads on curriculum development work on the Government's behalf, with strong engagement with the teaching profession.

The questions on assessment will be set out to Parliament tomorrow, and further steps will be taken as a consequence of that.

The Promise

Sue Webber: In March, the committee met care-experienced young people in informal sessions that were facilitated by Who Cares? Scotland. In those sessions, many young people told us that the experience of the care system has not changed in the years since the Promise was made. I do not want to upset the Deputy First Minister, but those young people, who were from

Shetland, had very good experience to feed back to us.

The committee has also heard repeatedly in evidence sessions that there are significant issues with recruitment and retention of social workers across Scotland, which are impacting on young people's ability to access support.

What measures is the Scottish Government taking to ensure that those issues are resolved urgently? Given that the Scottish Government is committed to delivering the Promise by 2030, why is a Promise bill not included in the programme for Government?

13:00

The First Minister: First, I reaffirm my commitment and the Government's commitment to implementing the Promise. That is an absolute commitment from the Government, and we are seeing through the steps that are necessary to do that.

Various steps are being taken to implement the Promise, and not all of them require us to wait on a Promise bill. The Children (Care and Justice) (Scotland) Act 2024 has had a significant impact on reforming the way in which care is delivered for some young people, and I welcome the progress that has been made there. As a consequence of the passing of that act, it is now against the law for a child to be retained in a young offenders institution, which I welcome as a positive consequence.

A number of pathfinders will be taken forward around the bairns' hoose model. I have discussed earlier with the group the work that has been done on whole-family wellbeing support, which is also part of the Promise. Fundamentally, at the heart of the Promise is the recognition that it is better, when it is safe to do so, that young people be kept with their families with the provision of whole-family support. That approach is now having an effect on the whole of Government policy. The latest public statistics show that there has been a reduction in the number of looked-after children since 2020, so progress is being made in that respect.

However, I acknowledge that there are some deep and serious issues and that we need to address them as quickly as we possibly can.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I now call Collette Stevenson, on behalf of the Social Justice and Social Security Committee.

Child Poverty Strategy (Work with UK Government)

Collette Stevenson (Convener, Social Justice and Social Security Committee): Good

afternoon, First Minister. Can you outline what discussions the Scottish Government is having with the UK Government about its development of a child poverty strategy? What can the UK Government learn from the approach that Scotland has taken with the “Best Start, Bright Futures” delivery plan?

The First Minister: There has already been some dialogue on measures around child poverty between the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice and the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills and their counterparts in the United Kingdom Government. Yesterday, I received a letter from the Secretary of State for Education and the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions inviting the Government to work with the UK Government on that agenda: of course, we will engage in that.

With “Best Start, Bright Futures”, we aimed to put in place a comprehensive programme of interventions that would fundamentally be about strengthening the capacity of families to support their children and to work their way out of poverty. Some of the measures are about direct financial support, such as the Scottish child payment.

Other measures will be about the expansion of the early learning and childcare support programme and ensuring that people who are eligible for it are able to take it up. There is huge variation around the country in uptake. For example, one of the programme indicators is the proportion of eligible two-year-olds who take up early learning and childcare, and it shows that the degree to which it is taken up varies enormously around the country. There is some really outstanding performance in that area. In Clackmannanshire Council, in excess of 90 per cent of children who are eligible are taking up the option, but in other parts of the country the figure is 30 per cent. That degree of variation is too broad, so we have to work to improve it.

There are other measures, such as employability support, to which it is important that families have access.

If I was advising the UK Government, I would advise it to take comprehensive measures of the type that we have taken in “Best Start, Bright Futures”. I would also advise it to remove some of the provisions that exacerbate the problem—principally, the two-child limit.

Whole-family Support

Collette Stevenson: That is helpful.

I will move on to another theme. In the programme for government, the First Minister emphasised the importance of whole-family support, which you have already alluded to today, and of a joined-up approach to local service

delivery. What specific measures is the Scottish Government taking to ensure that there is

“closer working across childcare, education, housing, justice, and health services, so that people can quickly and easily access the support needed to enter and stay in work.”

The First Minister: To me, that is the heart of the child poverty strategy that we have to pursue. I do not take the view that a solution in one neat little compartment will work—it is not all down to childcare, for example, or, alternatively, the Scottish child payment. I do not take that view at all. It is a complex issue.

The obligation on public services must be to ensure that families are properly supported out of poverty, so there has to be an integrated solution. For one family, one approach might work, and for another family, another approach might work, depending on their circumstances. The crucial point is that we must listen to those families and we must address their needs.

What I have seen in, for example, the pathfinder work that has been undertaken in the cities of Dundee and Glasgow is that those models are very effective in addressing the underlying persistence of child poverty. The aspiration that is set out in the programme for government is that we have to ensure that such provision is more systemic around the country, rather than being good examples that take place in different parts of the country.

Programme for Government (Environment)

13:06

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am conscious that a number of colleagues have joined us late as a result of stage 2 proceedings in a couple of the committees. I will slightly reorder the questioning to allow everybody in—probably in an order that is a bit more coherent and makes sense. I invite Edward Mountain first on behalf of the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee and I will then come to Finlay Carson.

Climate Change Targets

Edward Mountain (Convener, Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee): Thank you, convener. I apologise to you and the First Minister for being late.

In summer 2023, it was made clear that we would not reach our climate change targets for 2030. In March this year, that was discussed and agreed. On 18 April, we had a statement in the Parliament about the fact that there would have to be a new climate change bill. The Climate Change (Emissions Reduction Targets) (Scotland) Bill finally came to the committee on 5 September, despite my asking for early sight of it or discussions on it in the months of April, May, June, July and August and at the beginning of September.

There will have to be an expedited process, which I suspect will require standing orders to be suspended to get the bill through to meet the Parliament's and the Government's deadlines. Are you happy that that is the right way for the committee to have been treated in relation to the bill? I struggle with it, First Minister.

The First Minister: It is not ideal, Mr Mountain, but we sometimes find ourselves in circumstances in which we have to work with urgency on different questions. Sometimes, it is just not possible to undertake the type of lengthy and appropriate procedures that I accept are normally in place for legislative change.

In advance of your joining today's meeting, we discussed slightly the arrangements for framework provisions in the bill, which are simply driven by the timing of the legal obligations that the Government faces. The reason why we have introduced the bill is that the Government knows that it will not be able to fulfil its legal duty and to operate within the law, and the Government has to address that. Those circumstances create the type of timescale difficulties that you have put to me.

I suspect that some of that timing issue will be down to the fact that we had an election and that issues could not properly be pursued because of the strictures that were put on us. I had just become First Minister and, if members will recall, I had set out my priorities to Parliament, but I was then unable to bring any of those priorities to Parliament because an election was called on that day and the rules about implications for wider electoral processes kicked in. Of course, this subject would be material to that, given the sensitivities around net zero issues in the United Kingdom general election campaign.

That is a long way for me to say that we are where we are, but I will say to Mr Mountain that I hope that he will take no discourtesy from the Government about the way in which that has been handled. If he does, I apologise to him for that.

Edward Mountain: I thank the First Minister for that answer. My problem is that you are right. We are where we are and we are having to go through a process that requires us to run and, when it comes to legislation, running probably leads to bad legislation.

A simple way of resolving this would have been to lodge, back in May, an amendment to the Climate Change (Emissions Reduction Targets) (Scotland) Act 2019 to remove the requirement to publish a climate change plan by 22 or 24 November—I cannot remember which, but it is one of those two dates—which would have taken the pressure off the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee and would have allowed it to take into account the feed-in from other committees. Did you consider that, First Minister? It would have been an elegant solution, perhaps.

The First Minister: Mr Mountain might describe it as “elegant” today, but I am not sure that he would have described it as elegant in May, if it had been offered—if I may suggest that.

It would also have been temporary, because it would not address the underlying problem, which is the issue that we have to get at. It would essentially just delay the addressing of the underlying problem. Mr Mountain will understand my appetite to address the underlying problem and to get everybody focused on delivering the solutions that we have to deliver.

Edward Mountain: I know that I am not entitled to another question, so my only comment is that it was confirmed that the bill was ready in April. It was a pity that we did not get it earlier. I thank the First Minister for his answers.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: It is okay. Kenneth Gibson broke through that barrier earlier in the proceedings.

I will now call Finlay Carson, on behalf of the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee.

National Outcomes Review (Rural Areas)

Finlay Carson (Convener, Rural Affairs and Islands Committee): Thank you, convener, and good afternoon, First Minister. Once again, I apologise for arriving late at this meeting.

Our committee has been asked to respond to the national outcomes review. However, there is scant mention of rural areas in the national outcomes, which are supposed to enable Scotland's communities to flourish. How will you ensure that the outcomes will be rural-proofed to ensure that remote, rural and island communities can flourish?

The First Minister: I certainly want to make sure that that is the case. The national outcomes are the best attempt at trying to distil the impact that the Government and public authorities are trying to have through working in collaboration with the private sector and the third sector on a variety of community interests and perspectives. We must be prepared to keep those national outcomes under review and make sure that they fulfil the test that Mr Carson is fairly putting to me, so that members of the public in all parts of the country can feel that their interests are the proper focus of all the different interventions that are made. I am certainly happy to look at whether more can be done to address that.

In the national outcomes, there will be questions about housing, the economy and transportation, all of which will have relevance to rural communities. They might also throw up some significant challenges about the performance and delivery of existing policy in that respect.

Finlay Carson: To delve a little deeper, how will you rural proof future policies in practice? We are very aware that rural, remote and island communities face specific challenges. How can we be sure that, when policies are moved forward, we take every effort to ensure that there are no negative impacts?

The First Minister: That is a slightly different question from the focus on the national outcomes, because it can be addressed through policy making. There will be some statutory elements such as islands impact assessments that have to be undertaken. Policy papers that come to the Cabinet are comprehensive and look at all implications. In addition, of course, committees of the Parliament have the opportunity to consider all those questions and challenge the Government on them. However, I acknowledge their importance and the importance of ensuring that there are appropriate solutions in place for all parts of the country.

For example, in the delivery of housing, very different approaches will work in urban and rural areas. However, it is important that, whatever the geography, communities are able to get an outcome that meets their needs. That can be built into policy making.

Programme for Government (Housing)

13:16

Rural Housing Targets

Finlay Carson: You touched on housing. My committee does not deal with that specifically. However, you suggest that there are unique solutions. Why is the rural housing target an arbitrary percentage of the national target rather than being set on exactly what the housing needs of rural areas are?

The First Minister: That is an entirely reasonable question. I am conscious of the acute challenges that we face in housing in urban and rural situations, and the Government is focused on how we can maximise the impact and effect of our housing interventions. Some of that might well be through the construction of new build. Another option might be to bring back into use properties that are no longer in use, and I venture to suggest significant benefits in relation to the carbon footprint of such an approach.

We should be open to those questions, because there may well be different ways in which we can make more impact on particular areas of policy as a consequence.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Given that we are on housing, I invite Ariane Burgess to come in on behalf of the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee, after which I will come to Karen Adam.

Housing Emergency

Ariane Burgess (Convener, Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee): You touched on an area that I was going to ask about, First Minister. The Scottish Government declared a housing emergency in May this year, and the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee is undertaking an inquiry into the housing emergency and the sufficiency of the response to it. The programme for government reiterates many of the measures to respond to the emergency that were set out in the parliamentary statement that was made by the Minister for Housing in June, such as working with social landlords to reduce the number of void properties. Given that more councils are declaring housing emergencies, how will the measures that were set out in the Minister for Housing's statement in June and reiterated in the programme for government form an adequate response to the housing emergency?

The First Minister: That is very much the focus of the Government's attention and thinking, and the Parliament will scrutinise the Government's performance in that respect. The measures that the Minister for Housing set out to Parliament lie at the heart of the programme for government, and we are trying to maximise the effectiveness of those measures within the resources that are available to us.

I have had constructive discussions with the United Kingdom Government about one issue that causes me real concern: our financial arrangements. The bulk of the negative impact on the finance that is available for housing programmes in Scotland has come from the significant reduction in the availability of the financial transactions facility. I am trying to persuade the United Kingdom Government that that facility represents a very efficient way of securing long-term housing investment, and it would be beneficial for the rest of the United Kingdom as well as for Scotland. We are trying to expand the resource pool. If we can do that, it would enable us to do a great deal more on housing, given the pressures that we are experiencing on the capital budget in general.

There is a constant focus on that question, which is a topic I discuss with housing ministers. Obviously, the Deputy First Minister is involved in many of the questions about how we stimulate and motivate private investment in housing, which is an important element of the programme that we put in place. We are exploring a variety of different interventions.

Ariane Burgess: It is good to hear that, but financial transactions are not the only part of the issue. The committee hears about the lack of workforce and my question also mentioned voids, because more than 40,000 empty properties could be brought back into use with some urgency. It would be good to hear what the Government is doing in both regards.

The First Minister: People will probably be getting a bit fed up of the First Minister going on and on about voids. I agree with Ariane Burgess that there is a significant early opportunity to try to address that matter. There is a community of interest that must be brought together, involving not only the workforce, public authorities, councils and registered social landlords but private interests and utility companies, which can be significant allies in trying to make progress on getting voids back into use.

That is an important part of the programme and we are exploring how our interventions can make the most progress. To go back to Mr Carson's question about outcomes, we need to know what outcome we are trying to get to with housing. We want to improve the number of available houses,

and the quickest way to get there might be by investing more in voids than in new builds. Lining up utility companies, colleges, the workforce, private interests, Government funding and local authorities might give us more progress towards the outcome that we are all interested in achieving, which is to improve the amount of stock that is available. That is actively being explored within Government at the moment.

Ariane Burgess: I look forward to hearing more about that.

Can I move on, Deputy Presiding Officer?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am conscious that we have about 10 minutes left and that I have a couple of colleagues to get in.

Programme for Government (Local Government)

Verity House Agreement

13:22

Ariane Burgess: I will move on to a question about local government. Three of the four key priorities in the programme for government—eradicating child poverty, tackling the climate emergency and ensuring high-quality and sustainable public services—are also shared priorities in the Verity house agreement. There is much emphasis in the programme for government on local delivery of national approaches. To what extent does local government have the necessary resources and flexibility to deliver on those key priorities? What will you do in the coming year to ensure that more significant progress is made on the Verity house agreement?

The First Minister: The Verity house agreement is an important foundation of the Government's relationship with local authorities, and I have made it clear to local government that I intend to maintain that agreement. Tomorrow, I will meet the presidential team of the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities for the biannual meeting that was envisaged under the Verity house agreement, before addressing the COSLA annual conference in the afternoon.

That engagement with local government is important because, as I have said, and I will make this point again in my speech to the COSLA conference tomorrow, the four themes of the Government's programme for government—eradicating child poverty, economic growth, net zero and public service improvement—cannot be delivered without engagement in partnership with local authorities. Local government is a crucial partner.

I want to create and foster a basis for engagement and alignment. I have form on such matters: those who have been around for a long time will remember my endeavours on the concordat. The Deputy Presiding Officer and others witnessed and went through that whole process. That relationship matters to me, and I want to encourage and foster it.

On resources, I have to accept that money is tight for everyone, including the Government and local authorities, but I make a plea for people to display a willingness to reform how we utilise money, because we have to make it go further. If we engage in a conversation in which people simply say, "We can't do anything unless you give us more money," we will not address the issues that people are troubled by. If we have a

conversation about what we can do with the money that we have available to us, we might achieve better outcomes as a consequence. I am keen to foster such conversations. That does not apply only to the Government. Some of the measures on addressing child poverty that we have set out in the programme for government involve changing the way in which the Government controls and spends money, and that must apply to local authorities, too.

Programme for Government (Timetabling)

13:25

Proposed Human Rights Bill

Karen Adam (Convener, Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee): Good afternoon, First Minister. Human rights organisations and organisations in wider civil society have expressed their disappointment at the delay to the proposed human rights bill. They have worked on the bill with the Scottish Government for a number of years, including on a voluntary basis. Can you explain why the bill has been delayed? How have you communicated that to stakeholders? What does that mean for Scotland's position on the incorporation of human rights?

The First Minister: First, I very much welcome organisations' engagement on and participation in that important on-going work with the Government. We must tread with care. Anyone who looks at the passage of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Incorporation) (Scotland) Bill, for which I was responsible in its original form, will know that the interaction between such legislation and United Kingdom legislation and the devolution settlement is very complicated. We fell foul of that with that bill. I gave instructions for the bill to be constructed as a maximalist bill, because I wanted it to have the most impact. As a consequence, we, in essence, clipped some UK provisions, which led to some challenging legal issues that delayed the bill's implementation.

We simply want to make sure that we get things right. The incorporation of human rights legislation is fundamental to who we are as a society in Scotland today, but we must be mindful of the legal steps that need to be taken to get that correct.

Programme for Government (Environment)

does not work for people in the communities in rural Aberdeenshire that Karen Adam represents.

13:27

Access to Services (Rural Areas)

Karen Adam: My second question is a supplementary to the question from the convener of the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee. It is important to highlight that, throughout the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee's work—for example, on HIV treatment and awareness, suicide prevention and access to justice—we have seen that there is a negative correlation between rurality and the provision of support services. What more can the Scottish Government do to ensure that people in rural areas receive the support services that they need?

The First Minister: That is a very fair and important question. I acknowledge that the delivery of such services and interventions is made more challenging in rural areas. In a sense, my answer is that we must look for ways in which we can take services to people rather than requiring people to come to us.

I can remember an example from my period as education secretary, in Mr Carson's part of the world, when we were rolling out pupil equity funding. A school in Kirkcudbright invested its pupil equity funding in providing speech and language therapy resources in the school, which meant that someone came to the school. Under the previous model, if a pupil needed an intervention, they had to get the bus from Kirkcudbright to Dumfries to make their appointment. If the bus was cancelled, they missed their appointment. Children had been suffering as a result of that.

The school reported to me that there had been a massive improvement in the performance of children and in their communication skills. That had happened because the speech and language therapist had been brought into the classroom and was sitting with the child. They were not an appointment or a bus journey away; they were absolutely close at hand. The impact on the children was fabulous. That is a good example of the upside of access to services, which Karen Adam raised with me.

That also relates to the point that Mr Carson made to me about the need for enough attention to be paid to ensuring that solutions are put in place, as opposed to believing that members of the public must come to a centre of service delivery in order to access their services. That might work for people in the centre of a city, but it

Programme for Government (Housing)

13:30

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I will give the last word to Stuart McMillan.

Proposed Leases (Automatic Continuation etc) (Scotland) Bill

Stuart McMillan: The programme for government included the proposed Leases (Automatic Continuation etc) (Scotland) Bill, which is based on work by the Scottish Law Commission. As such, that bill is a likely candidate to go to the Delegated Powers and Law Reform Committee for it to lead on. As you will be aware, our committee is always happy to help when it comes to SLC bills and proposals. It would be helpful if you could set out why the Scottish Government has prioritised that bill and what the Government seeks to achieve through it.

The First Minister: We try to be as responsive as we possibly can be to the very considerable work that the Scottish Law Commission undertakes. The proposed bill is designed to address long-standing issues with commercial leases, which have been the subject of detailed scrutiny and inquiry by the Scottish Law Commission. When we invite the commission to examine such issues, which might not be the most controversial, but which have an effect on members of the public and on organisations in our society, it is important to ensure that the contents of its proposals are addressed. We will engage with committees on the matter.

Stuart McMillan: Thank you.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes our meeting with the First Minister. I hope that we can repeat the exercise in around six months' time—by which stage I will have finally got round to watching "The Outrun".

I thank the First Minister and the rest of the group for their attendance. The group's next meeting will be next week, on Wednesday 25 September.

Meeting closed at 13:32.

