Written submission from Steve Aitken, Founder, Intelligent Plant Limited,

Dear Convener and Committee Members,

Thank you again for the invitation to appear before the Committee today. I greatly appreciated the insightful questions and the committee's willingness to focus on what I see as a profoundly important area for Scotland's future. Being invited publicly to speak on such a subject will undoubtedly serve both me and Intelligent Plant well, by highlighting our thoughts to the marketplace in such a respected forum.

I am conscious that in responding to the question from Ms. Thompson regarding the current support ecosystem and skills, my answer was perhaps overly focused on the lack of such infrastructure at Intelligent Plant's founding. It is vital to get a more balanced view on the record for newer companies now forming in Scotland:

Key Clarifications and Strategic Policy Considerations

1. **The Evolution of Ecosystem Support (A Historical Flaw):** While supportive catalysts like CodeBase, Opportunity North East (ONE), and the university entrepreneurial campus work (driven by the Scottish Government's blueprint) did not exist when I started, we now have a powerful, collaborative network. When Intelligent Plant was founded, the booming local energy economy meant we were able to build products (that funnily enough first sold outside Aberdeen and outside oil and gas). However, a historical flaw in Aberdeen was the common trend of smaller companies selling out at a "retirement money" milestone, ending their local employment and long-term economic benefit. The new ecosystem is actively encouraging local founders to **scale, not sell**, in order to retain talent and value in Scotland. Ensuring that this message comes similarly at all levels is important to getting it across.

2. **The Role of Public Investment and Global Visibility:** A significant factor in our own AI journey was the support we received from the Scottish Government, specifically the **EETF funding for our AI in Hydrogen project**. In our bid, we described a universal, conversational AI system *prior* to the public launch of ChatGPT. This early funding was absolutely key in enabling us to position Intelligent Plant as a leader in this field. We must continue to support and highlight existing work in AI to ensure Scotland is highly visible and seen as a relevant, active player on the global stage.

3. **The Challenge of AI Taxation (A Global Analogy):** I often ponder the tax that is levied on domestically produced fossil fuels, but not on imported fuels from other countries. There is an analogy in AI: **The value generated by human labour is intrinsically linked to our public tax base** (through income tax and social contributions). When AI competes directly with this labour, its output avoids the social contribution burden entirely. If AI is left untaxed while human labour is taxed, machines have an unfair advantage. If Scotland alone attempted to tax AI, it would likely disadvantage us globally,

but finding the right international framework to tax AI is essential for humanity to ensure a fair work future where machines do not have an unfair economic advantage.

4. **Encouraging Foundational Research:** While AI models are becoming commoditized and downloadable for free, the underlying hardware is not. Encouraging local research into new **microchip designs and AI system designs** in Scotland could be highly beneficial, creating competitive advantage at the foundational level.

5. **Current Economic Headwinds in Aberdeen:** It is necessary to acknowledge that despite the excellent ecosystem efforts, the local economy in Aberdeen remains challenging. The decline in the oil and gas **traditional, large customers** is currently happening faster than replacement customers from the emerging renewables sector are appearing, making it more difficult for founders now attempting to get off the ground than when I started.

I want to offer any way to help that I can in future to the Committee.

Thank you again for your time and serious consideration of this topic.

Yours sincerely,

Steve Aitken

Founder, Intelligent Plant Limited, Technology Leadership Board, ONE Digital Board, Honorary EIR

21 November 2025

Member-Specific Takeaways

The Convener (Daniel Johnson)

The commonality in our backgrounds in **philosophy** underscored my point about the need to integrate ethics, the arts, and long-term societal value into the AI conversation. My early pivot from philosophy to computing was necessary then, but now the most valuable skills for the future rely on that philosophical core—ensuring technology is built on a robust ethical and human foundation. Building a 'Trust Economy' is the essential philosophical challenge of the AI era.

Michelle Thompson (Deputy Convener)

I deeply appreciate the personal effort you have made to address the AI challenge as the **'juggernaut'** that it is. Your question on the ecosystem was highly relevant, and I wish to re-confirm that the goal of the new collaborative infrastructure is precisely to tackle the historical flaw of companies selling out too early. Public funding, like the EETF for our AI in Hydrogen project, is the catalyst needed to push emerging leaders toward that global scale.

Murdo Fraser

On the subject of **economic and workforce impact**, I want to emphasize that in Aberdeen's energy sector history, the common trend of smaller tech companies selling out for 'retirement money' severely limited long-term job creation and economic growth. The key for future policy is encouraging this *scale* over *sale* to maximize retained economic benefit and highly skilled local employment, particularly as the traditional oil and gas economy faces challenges.

Gordon McDonald

Following our discussion on **regulation and global competition**, I want to highlight that the EETF funding we received for our AI in Hydrogen project allowed us to take a major stake in this field *before* the global AI boom, essentially using public funds to secure a leading position. This strategic, early public investment is crucial to ensure Scottish companies can out-compete larger, better-funded global players.

Willie Coffee

Reinforcing our conversation on **ethics and trust**, the long-term success of any company, especially those leveraging AI, hinges entirely on maintaining integrity. The new ecosystem is encouraging a focus on long-term sustainability and ethical scaling, believing that trust is the foundation for enduring global competitive advantage. This framework of integrity is more important than ever as AI amplifies the consequences of both good and bad decisions. You asked if it will always be a

constant fight between good and bad; the answer is yes, and it is our collective job to ensure that we do what we can to help the right side win.

Kevin Stewart

I want to personally acknowledge your support in suggesting my involvement, and I appreciate your **amazing efforts to process and use these comments for the benefit of Scotland**. The case of our EETF funding for the AI in Hydrogen project, where we bid for a conversational AI system *pre-ChatGPT launch*, is a perfect example of strategic public policy intersecting with innovative tech. This is the exact kind of insight that can be processed and used to position Scotland as a leader.