

Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for  
Economy and Gaelic  
Leas Phrìomh Mhinistear agus Rùnaire a' Chaibineit  
airson Eaconamaidh agus Gàidhlig  
Kate Forbes MSP  
Ceit Fhoirbheis BPA



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Claire Baker MSP  
Convener  
Economy and Fair Work Committee  
Scottish Parliament  
*By Email:*  
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Convener,

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the Energy and Fair Work Committee on 29 May to provide evidence on the Scottish Government's economic priorities. During the session, I agreed to follow up on certain areas in more detail. I have set out the additional information requested by the committee below.

### **Tourism visitor information centres and the impact on tourism**

The decision to close iCentres is a strategic and operational matter for VisitScotland and has been endorsed by its Board. This is the final tranche of closures that date back to 2005, when VisitScotland inherited 120 information centres from the previous Area Tourist Board Network. The previous phase of iCentre closures took place in 2018-2019, at 34 locations. These proposals will bring VisitScotland into line with Visit England and Visit Wales, neither of which operate visitor centres.

VisitScotland's decision to close iCentres is based on the data. Evidence shows that 99% of visitors now book accommodation in advance of travelling, and 67% of global travellers book their itineraries in advance of arriving at their destination. The data also shows that the number of visitors using iCentres has significantly dropped over the years particularly after Covid. The decrease from 2019 to 2023 ranges from 16% to 57% across the 25 remaining locations.

For VisitScotland to provide better quality information to more people in a more efficient and responsible way, inspiring and influencing visitors in advance of their visits will be more impactful for our visitor economy. Prioritising destination development and community tourism work will ensure that VisitScotland remains focused and committed to the place-based priorities of NSET, increasing economic, cultural, environmental and social benefits across the whole country. Since 2019 and the pandemic, the Scottish visitor economy has

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seen overseas visit numbers increase by 14% and the number of tourism businesses increase by 6%.

Please also find requested footfall statistics within Annex A.

## **Apprenticeships**

We are committed to ensuring that apprenticeships remain of high quality and lead to sustainable employment opportunities characterised by fair work. Skills Development Scotland (SDS) commenced contracting for new apprenticeship opportunities at the start of April and Scottish Government investment will support up to 25,500 new Modern Apprenticeship starts, a similar level to 2023/24. This is in addition to ongoing support for around 38,000 modern apprentices already in training in 2024/25.

## **Region & City Growth Deals**

I undertook to provide material on the Scottish City Region and Growth Deal Delivery board. The minutes are routinely published online [here](#). The most recent meeting took place on 22 May 2024 and minutes are currently being drafted by the UK Government.

## **Prestwick Airport – Real Living Wage**

There are ongoing discussions in relation to payment of the Real Living Wage between officials and Glasgow Prestwick Airport senior management. I will provide an update on this matter in due course to the Committee.

## **A detailed update on the specific evaluations of the Techscaler programme**

Techscaler is the Scottish Government's programme for creating, developing, and scaling tech startups through education programmes, expert mentoring, and a growing network of physical hubs.

We have developed a suite of key performance indicators (KPIs) in collaboration with Techscaler management to track aspects of delivery against key milestones. We are also monitoring progress of outcomes and benefits realisation, for example, number of members, companies supported, investment attracted by supported start-ups, as well as the characteristics of participants to help assess equalities impacts.

According to the first Techscaler Annual Report (2023), independently produced by Business Database company Beauhurst, and published in March 2024:

- Startup companies supported by the Scottish Government's Techscaler programme attracted investment of more than £52 million in 2023.
- The Techscaler programme supported more than five hundred companies in its first year, and now has nearly 2,500 members.
- More than a third of those enrolling in one of the programme's education courses were women, compared to the startup industry average of 20%.

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This is a multi-year programme with key outcomes requiring time before the data becomes available to evidence them. We are scoping an early evaluation exercise for next year to learn lessons from the Techscaler delivery experience to support continuous improvement. We are also planning an impact evaluation in year three of the programme.

## **Conclusion**

I hope that the information has been helpful. I look forward to working constructively with the Committee going forward.



**KATE FORBES**

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## Annex A - iCentre annual footfall Data

iCentre	Annual Footfall				
	2019/2020	2020/2021	2021/2022	2022/2023	2023/2024
Aberdeen	40,683	2,030	11,438	22,531	28,596
Aberfoyle	72,333	7,378	41,691	57,634	54,407
Aviemore	71,908	6,948	29,947	48,541	36,442
Ballater	96,288	5,413	37,711	63,370	72,569
Balloch	70,448	10,391	33,296	49,600	53,972
Bowmore	23,306	1,732	7,688	10,050	14,330
Brodick	25,586	1,887	11,890	21,391	19,459
Craignure	66,085	5,778	27,379	47,317	50,496
Dumfries	19,648	4,628	11,009	11,783	11,330
Edinburgh	253,567	11,322	56,420	161,771	186,025
Fort William	150,851	9,856	29,147	80,175	89,158
Glasgow	102,085	2,872	19,369	56,568	68,198
Inverness	112,397	8,252	32,171	73,037	77,286
Jedburgh	23,695	3,815	13,311	19,666	23,521
Kirkwall	139,036	3,368	23,251	74,322	122,662
Lerwick	56,478	3,653	19,527	41,214	53,644
Oban	147,424	12,717	41,225	73,199	59,700
Perth	29,535	2,637	12,262	19,598	21,604
Pitlochry	43,723	5,830	21,347	34,501	34,446
Portree	99,801	6,619	23,067	51,214	54,043
Rothesay	60,084	5,074	14,649	38,691	56,396
St Andrews	94,548	5,555	27,022	53,921	68,609
Stirling	84,118	11,554	27,434	44,445	59,008
Stornoway	28,962	2,144	12,423	19,267	19,018
Ullapool	34,296	2,798	10,426	28,767	31,719

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