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Scottish Parliament

Wednesday 18 December 2024

[The Deputy Presiding Officer opened the meeting at 14:00]

Portfolio Question Time

Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): Good afternoon. The first item of business is portfolio question time, and the first portfolio is rural affairs, land reform and islands. Members who wish to ask a supplementary question should press their request-to-speak button during the relevant question. We are tight for time across the afternoon, so I will need brevity in questions and responses in this portfolio and the next one.

Scottish Own-brand Supermarket Products

1. Annabelle Ewing (Cowdenbeath) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government when it last met with supermarkets to discuss the stocking of Scottish own-brand products. (S6O-04121)

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands (Mairi Gougeon): I met senior grocery retailer representatives most recently at the Royal Highland Show in June to discuss some of the good work that is being undertaken to support Scottish suppliers, as well as to look at ways of further increasing the volume of Scottish produce that is available on store shelves.

Furthermore, we have committed £10 million over the period of 2023 to 2025 to support delivery of Scotland's food and drink strategy, "Sustaining Scotland. Supplying the World." That funding facilitates a range of activities and direct engagement with grocery retailers to increase the volume of Scottish food and drink, including own-brand products, on retail shelves.

Annabelle Ewing: The cabinet secretary will be aware that NFU Scotland's most recent shelf watch report, which was published last week, showed a decline in the stocking of Scottish-branded produce in all leading supermarkets except Lidl. That short-changing not just of our farmers and crofters but of our consumers is surely unacceptable.

What further action will the Scottish Government take, as a matter of urgency, to get the supermarkets that operate in Scotland to step up?

Mairi Gougeon: I thank Annabelle Ewing for raising that important point and for highlighting the

important monitoring work that NFUS undertakes through its shelf watch campaign.

Of course, it is disappointing to see the outcomes in the most recent shelf watch report, but I assure Annabelle Ewing that, through the strategy that I mentioned in my initial response, we have strong engagement with all major retailers and we are doing what we can to support them to get more Scottish food and drink on to supermarket shelves.

In addition, we are doing a range of work across retail, with major retailers, smaller and local convenience stores, and the wider wholesale sector, because we want to support the stocking and sale of more local Scottish produce through Scottish suppliers.

In Scotland, we are fortunate to have one of the best natural larders in the world, and we want that produce to reach as many consumers as possible and to make it as easy as possible for them to access it. We will continue to do all that we can to enable that.

Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland) (Lab): The minister will be aware that NatureScot estimates that an increase of 50,000 in the national cull of deer each year will be needed to meet the targets in the Scottish biodiversity strategy. What discussions has she or the Government had with supermarkets about bringing that abundant resource from our natural larder to the Scottish public?

Mairi Gougeon: Ms Villalba raises a really important point, because we want to see more of that produce on supermarket shelves. Through Forestry and Land Scotland, we have agreements with one business in particular about the deer that it can access, and that produce is available in our supermarkets. However, we want to make sure that people in Scotland can enjoy that resource and that we make it as accessible as possible to people, so we will continue to do all that we can to support that work.

Neonicotinoid Pesticides

2. Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on what its position is on the use of neonicotinoid pesticides. (S6O-04122)

The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie): The Scottish Government takes very seriously the potential impact on public health and the environment of the use of chemicals. We continue to support the regulatory decisions to restrict the use of neonicotinoid insecticides, due to their environmental effects, particularly on bees and pollinators. Those pesticides have not been used in Scottish crop protection since their approval was withdrawn.

Pesticide products that are authorised for use in Scotland are tightly regulated and, before authorisation, are subject to thorough analysis by the chemicals regulation division of the Health and Safety Executive, to demonstrate that the product is effective and poses no unacceptable risks to people, animals or the environment.

Kevin Stewart: My constituency is the only one in the north-east of Scotland with no farms. However, Aberdeen Central has a number of beekeepers. Beekeepers are worried about the use of neonicotinoids and their effect on pollinators, and I am pleased to hear that the Scottish Government will continue to keep a tight rein on the use of those pesticides. What discussions has the minister had at the United Kingdom level to make sure that those pesticides are not used in these islands?

Jim Fairlie: Whether those pesticides are used in these islands is a matter for the UK Government—the Scottish Government can do only what we are doing here.

We operate a range of monitoring strategies in Scotland. Pesticide usage patterns are monitored by our pesticide usage team, which performs annual surveys to estimate Scottish pesticide use on a range of agricultural and horticultural crops, and a lot more besides. I am more than happy to meet the member if he wants to know more.

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): Will the minister update the Parliament on progress to find a replacement for Asulox in the control of bracken?

Jim Fairlie: As the member knows, a number of issues are being looked at around the control of bracken, and we can provide an update on that as we come to a conclusion.

International Fishing Vessels (Monitoring)

3. Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government how its marine directorate monitors international fishing vessels. (S6O-04123)

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands (Mairi Gougeon): The marine directorate monitors fishing activities by using its network of coast-based officers, marine protection vessels, surveillance aircraft and a 24-hour monitoring centre. Inspections on all vessels are determined using either a risk assessment process, which considers fleet types and impacts but not nationality, or assurance inspections.

The monitoring of vessel landings involves ascertaining the quantities and species by counting and observing any weighing of fish and checking the results against mandatory pre-landing electronic documentation. Additionally,

post-landing checks are undertaken, focusing on vessels that do not land into a Scottish port. Those require collaboration with inspection agencies from the landing or flag states.

Tim Eagle: I want to see a thriving fishing sector that makes the most of all opportunities. However, there is a part of the industry that is concerned that some landings are not correctly recorded. It is vital for our fleet that our data is fully robust and that there is equality in monitoring.

One of the concerns relates to when European Union boats return to land in their own European ports. Last year, Scottish and United Kingdom authorities negotiated with the Faroese Government for Faroese vessels that are exiting UK waters, and vice versa, to make their way to a predetermined point for inspection before exiting the exclusive economic zone. Has the cabinet secretary, working with the UK and Scottish authorities, contemplated putting in place similar plans for EU vessels that are leaving UK waters to land their catch elsewhere, which might help to establish some control in that area?

Mairi Gougeon: Tim Eagle raises really important points, and I absolutely agree with him about wanting to see a thriving fishing sector. The control areas that he mentioned are currently part of the agreement that we have with the Faroese demersal and mackerel fisheries, as well as a Norwegian mackerel agreement. They have worked particularly well in the recent mackerel fishery, because vessels were directed to a control area where they were inspected by either a marine protection vessel or by coastal officers in port.

However, the control areas are resource intensive, which can limit the availability of the assets that we have to inspect vessels while they are fishing. Marine directorate officials regularly use powers to require a vessel to move to an area to facilitate an inspection, and all non-UK vessels that are departing UK waters must electronically submit the time that they want to exit, as well as the quantity of fish that they have on board. That allows for the targeting of vessels prior to their exiting UK waters.

The control areas have worked well and we continue to look at how we can improve them, but we need to take into account the resource considerations.

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): A freedom of information response in August showed that, out of 81 marine directorate job posts advertised, only 27 were filled. I have previously raised concerns with the cabinet secretary about the state of the organisation's laboratory building in Aberdeen. Does the cabinet secretary agree that, without a fully staffed team and adequate resources, the marine directorate will struggle to

fulfil its remit, including the appropriate monitoring of landings by non-UK fishing vessels?

Mairi Gougeon: The marine directorate covers a wide area, so I would have to look into the job vacancies that the member mentions in a bit more detail.

The member rightly mentions the marine lab in Aberdeen, which we have discussed at length in committee. I recognise how important those facilities are and the need to keep them in good order. A Scottish Government project is under way to look at the overall long-term plans for the site, and the matter is still under consideration. However, we want to upgrade the facilities as best we can to provide a good working environment for the staff of the marine directorate.

Farming Businesses (Support for Diversification)

4. Sharon Dowe (South Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to support farming businesses that are seeking to diversify. (S6O-04124)

The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie): The Scottish Government strongly supports farming businesses to diversify, providing businesses with a range of income streams and stimulating the rural economy.

We provide support to plant and manage trees, and provide advice, events and courses on business resilience and diversification through the Farm Advisory Service and Skills Hub Scotland. We give funding to Scottish Agritourism to assist agritourism businesses that keep multiple generations of farming families in employment in rural areas, which is really important, and provide support to help businesses to promote and sell their produce locally and regionally.

Unfortunately, United Kingdom Government budget decisions are having a really damaging impact on our ability to fund measures on the multiyear horizon that agriculture needs.

Sharon Dowe: Annually, farms that have diversified bring millions of pounds to Scotland's economy, and the services that they offer can include farm shops, garden centres, milk vending machines, coffee shops and camping pods. However, their rural location means that infrastructure and signage is key to allowing customers to find them. Businesses face major barriers in obtaining signage for opening up and directional signage when improvements are made to main roads.

The Coo Shed in my local area received no prior communication that its main access road was to close for four months. The closure impacted customers, farm suppliers, milk tankers and the

company's sales, causing unnecessary stress and anguish. What discussions can the minister have with his colleagues in other portfolios to make major improvements to that process?

Jim Fairlie: That is a really important question, and I take it in the spirit in which it was asked. As far as signage is concerned, that is a transport issue, and I will take that away.

As far as access to a local business is concerned, I am more than happy to meet Sharon Dowe to discuss that specific issue.

Connectivity is part of my portfolio, so I will follow up on the specific issues of signage and what we can do to help with that.

Scottish Food Industry (Promotion)

5. Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what it is doing to promote the Scottish food industry. (S6O-04125)

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands (Mairi Gougeon): Scottish Government funding towards the food and drink industry strategy, "Sustaining Scotland. Supplying the World", supports a range of measures to promote Scottish produce at home and internationally, showcasing our remarkable food and drink businesses to wider audiences and markets.

A key example of that is the Showcasing Scotland global sales event that was held in March in Edinburgh, which connected more than 100 top international buyers with more than 100 Scottish businesses, potentially generating £77 million in sales for Scottish food and drink producers.

Marie McNair: In a recent joint statement, the Scottish Pelagic Processors Association and the Scottish Seafood Association said that the Labour United Kingdom Government's increase to national insurance contributions could threaten the seafood industry in Scotland. What discussions has the cabinet secretary had with the UK Government about the impact that that could have on Scotland's food industry?

Mairi Gougeon: Marie McNair raises a hugely important point. It is fair to say that food and drink businesses and our third sector—indeed, everyone across the piece—are struggling with the impact of the decisions that the UK Government has taken in its budget.

Marie McNair will be aware that the Scottish Parliament, in a number of debates that were held in November, has called on the UK Government to urgently commit to undertake and publish impact assessments on its budget announcements.

However, I want to highlight to Marie McNair and more generally to members from other parties that, together with the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government, Shona Robison, we have written to the UK Treasury to outline our serious concerns about some of the proposals in and the far-reaching impacts of the UK Government's budget.

Scottish ministers will continue to make those representations to the UK Government. We have regular ministerial meetings through the interministerial group, where we will continue to raise those matters.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 6 was not lodged.

Family Farms (Inheritance Tax Liability)

7. Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government, regarding the potential impact on agriculture, what assessment it has made of the number of family farms in Scotland that will incur inheritance tax liability as a result of changes announced in the United Kingdom budget. (S6O-04127)

The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie): I thank Stephen Kerr very much for raising this issue again.

Our officials have met representatives of the farming sector and UK Government officials to determine the impact of the policy change on family farms in Scotland. Given the lack of available data on the impact of the decision, there must be an immediate reversal and review of the policy. That should be followed by close engagement with the agricultural sector and the devolved Parliaments, so that there can be a proper understanding of what the policy will do to family farms.

Early estimates suggest that around 5,000 farm businesses in Scotland are likely to be worth more than £1 million and will potentially be impacted by the change. Due to the limitations of data on tenancies, we are unable to provide a separate estimate at this time of the number of tenant farmers who will be affected by it.

Stephen Kerr: I have done a calculation based on the UK Government's assessment that, overall, 28 per cent of farms will be impacted by its family farm tax grab, which means that, potentially, around 12,000 family farm businesses will be impacted.

Labour's family farm tax will have a devastating effect on the future of family farms and crofts. Scottish Land & Estates said that the

"effect of these measures threatens the immediate viability and future sustainability of thousands of rural businesses across Scotland."

On top of Labour's blow, the Scottish National Party budget was a bitter disappointment. The SNP is accused by the sector's representative bodies of failing to back rural Scotland, cutting funding in real terms—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please come to the question.

Stephen Kerr: —and failing to treat rural Scotland with seriousness. How does the minister expect the sector, given the challenges that it now faces, to remain attractive for the next generation of farmers, especially given—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call the minister.

Stephen Kerr: —the dearth of new entrants? What specific steps will the Scottish—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Minister.

Jim Fairlie: Stephen Kerr's first point highlights the fact that there are many different proposals for how to analyse what is happening in the family farming sector. The UK Government has to reverse its decision in order to do a proper impact assessment that will allow us to know exactly what is happening in the Scottish sector.

On Stephen Kerr's second point, the Scottish Government has maintained the full level of funding that has come from the UK Government, but it was his party's Government that ceased to increase the level of that funding. His Government took us out of the European Union, which had given us multiyear funding that was guaranteed for seven years. His Government did all of that, yet he has the audacity to come to this chamber and criticise the Scottish Government.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We have a couple of brief supplementary questions.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): To build on that response, does the minister agree that the uncertainties that the proposed inheritance tax change have brought about come in addition to the damage that has been caused by other policy decisions that have been taken by the current and previous UK Governments, including reckless trade deals that undercut our Scottish farmers?

Jim Fairlie: Yes, I agree with everything that Emma Harper has said. The Scottish industry is vital to rural Scotland. The Scottish Government has always put its full weight and support behind the industry, and we will continue to do so.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): I am against the inheritance tax changes for the agricultural sector, which will have a devastating impact and are not good for farming. However, the minister cannot simply say that the UK Government has to reverse the policy, although I

agree that it should be reversed; he has to have a much more practical plan for dealing with its consequences. If he does not understand what those consequences are, what hope does the farming sector have in looking to the Scottish Government to come up with answers? For instance, what will the policy change do to its land reform proposals? What will change on that front if those measures go through?

Jim Fairlie: Willie Rennie has gone about five steps forward there. He accepts that the decision must be reversed until there is a full assessment. There is a policy objective—perhaps not a bad one—behind what the Labour Party has done. However, it has completely misunderstood family farming in Scotland, the thresholds to which we have to work and the effects that the decision will have.

For the Labour Party to ask us to find solutions to that is a little bit off. Let us get the UK Government to sort the mess out in the first place, and we can start working forward from there.

Tenant Farmers (Impact of Agricultural Property Relief Changes)

8. **Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of any specific impact on tenant farmers in Scotland of the announced changes to agricultural property relief on inheritance tax. (S6O-04128)

The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie): Over half of Scottish agricultural tenancies are secure heritable tenancies. They are a unique feature of Scotland and might be disproportionately affected by the inheritance tax change compared with other parts of United Kingdom agriculture. Scottish Government officials are due to meet His Majesty's Revenue and Customs officials to discuss the impact of the changes on that particular group. The Scottish tenant farming advisory forum has written to the Treasury and the Secretary of State for Scotland to highlight the issue.

I believe that inheritance tax powers should be devolved to the Scottish Parliament so that the tax decisions can be designed and tailored in a Scottish context. As the cabinet secretary said, along with the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government, she has written to the UK Government to ask it to stop this damaging process.

Christine Grahame: As we know, we are talking about family farms that have been worked through the generations. It is not an ordinary job or business; it is a way of life. Many of those families will now be worried sick as to whether they can continue to the next generation. Does the minister

agree that the irony is that, if the farms are taken over by individuals not to farm but to reduce their inheritance tax liability—to do a Jeremy Clarkson, if you like—that would help rich hobby farmers to the cost of real farmers? Does Sir Keir Starmer understand rural Scotland at all?

Jim Fairlie: The straight answer to that is no. The Scottish Government shares the concerns about the potential impact of the imposed tax changes, and it is committed to working closely with our partners to fully understand the implications. Officials are already working with tenant farming stakeholders and the Scottish Land Commission to start to assess the range of impacts from the imposed tax changes. The Scottish Government has been clear with the UK Government about the concerns, and we will continue to emphasise them. A meeting with HMRC is scheduled to go ahead this week to gain further clarity on the potential effect on tenant farmers.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes portfolio questions on rural affairs. I note that the member who asked question 2 subsequently left during portfolio questions. I am very disappointed to see that. I will expect both an explanation and an apology.

There will be a brief pause before we move to the next item of business, to allow members on the front benches to change.

Health and Social Care

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The next item of business is portfolio questions on health and social care. Members who wish to ask a supplementary question should press their request-to-speak buttons during the relevant question.

Heart Disease Treatment Waiting Times

1. **Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking in light of statistics reportedly showing that a record number of people have been waiting over a year for heart disease treatment. (S6O-04129)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): We remain determined to drive down waiting times. Our proposed budget, which was set out on 4 December, allocates almost £200 million to reduce waiting lists and support the reduction of delayed discharge. By March 2026, we expect no one to be waiting longer than 12 months for a new treatment. Our heart disease action plan seeks to ensure that everybody with a suspected heart disease issue has timely and equitable access to diagnosis, treatment and care in Scotland. Progress to date includes supporting

the effective use of data to drive improvements and the development of nationally agreed pathways of care.

Alexander Stewart: In June, the cross-party group on heart and circulatory diseases published a report on its inquiry into the heart disease action plan. Clinicians reported that encouraging work is going on across Scotland to innovate and improve services, but the ability to implement that across all health boards is suffering due to a lack of funding. Will the cabinet secretary commit to increasing the focus on investment and the contribution to dealing with conditions across Scotland, because heart disease is Scotland's single biggest killer?

Neil Gray: Initial funding of £2.2 million over five years was provided to support the heart disease action plan from 2021, and we have committed to enabling a transformational shift in the use of cardiac data. That is why we commissioned the Scottish cardiac audit programme, in which we are investing £1.5 million over five years. In addition, the chief medical officer, Sir Gregor Smith, currently chairs the newly established cardiovascular disease risk factors programme, which is about preventing people from contracting a cardiovascular disease in the first place. That programme seeks to improve public and community understanding and to transform the models of care for the identification and management of the risk factor conditions. I hope that that helps to alleviate the concerns that Alexander Stewart might have.

Joe FitzPatrick (Dundee City West) (SNP): Although the issue that Alexander Stewart raises is of particular concern to Scotland, long waits for any patients are unacceptable, and urgent action must be taken to reduce waiting times across our national health service. Can the cabinet secretary say anything about the work that the Scottish Government is undertaking to help boards across the country to provide additional procedures and extra appointments?

Neil Gray: Yes, I can. I appreciate Joe FitzPatrick's interest in the issue. All long waits are regrettable, and I apologise to any patient who has had to wait too long for treatment and, indeed, to any clinician who has had to explain that long wait to their patients.

We are working hard to drive down waiting times. This year, our £30 million additional investment will deliver around 12,000 new out-patient appointments, 12,000 in-patient procedures, and more than 40,000 diagnostic procedures. As part of the 2025-26 budget announcement, we are allocating £200 million to help clear long waits and improve capacity, which will drive vital progress. The funding will be targeted at specialties with the longest waits and

will ensure that, by March 2026, no patient will wait longer than 12 months for a new out-patient appointment or in-patient or day-case procedure.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): The NHS is stretched to breaking point, and the Scottish Government's promises to bring down waiting lists, including those for heart disease treatment, lie in tatters.

Targets to remove long waits of more than a year were supposed to be met by September 2024, but the Scottish Government has failed to meet them. In England, 113 people are waiting more than two years; in Scotland, more than 11,000 people are waiting the same length of time. In per capita terms, Scottish waiting lists are 1,000 times longer. Does the cabinet secretary want to apologise to the people of Scotland for the SNP's failure?

Neil Gray: I already said, in response to Joe FitzPatrick's question, that I apologise to anybody who is waiting too long for treatment and, indeed, to any clinician who is having to explain those long waits. Of course I apologise.

That is why there is the investment that we are taking forward through the budget, which I would encourage Jackie Baillie to support, because she recognises the need for us to drive down long waits. However, she cannot will the end without willing the means, so the Labour Party needs to support the budget to ensure that the funding gets put in place so that we can get those waiting times down.

Mental Health Services (Children and Young People)

2. **David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on how it is working to improve access for children and young people to mental health services. (S6O-04130)

The Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport (Maree Todd): The Scottish Government is committed to ensuring that everyone has access to mental health support when they need it. We have supported increased mental health spending and seen the best ever reporting in national performance against the 18-week child and adolescent mental health service waiting time standard since it was introduced in 2014.

In addition, we have provided councils with more than £65 million since 2020 to develop and fund community-based supports for children and young people. Nearly 83,000 children, young people and family members accessed those early intervention and prevention services between July 2023 and March 2024.

We also provide £16 million a year to local authorities to ensure that children and young people have access to counselling through every secondary school in Scotland.

David Torrance: Will the minister outline how the Scottish Government will continue to invest in our local authorities and health boards to ensure that young people have quick access to the support that they need when they need it?

Maree Todd: We have allocated £120 million to national health service boards and integration joint boards to provide a single flexible funding stream, supporting continued improvement and better outcomes across mental health services, including CAMHS.

As I explained, as part of our effort to embed early intervention and prevention, our £15 million per annum investment in community-based mental health and wellbeing support and services for five to 24-year-olds and their families will be baselined in local authority budgets from 2025-26. More than 300 services are now available across Scotland. We will also continue to ensure access to school counselling services, which benefited more than 14,000 pupils in the first half of 2023 alone.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There is a lot of interest in this question. I will get through as many supplementaries as I can, but they will need to be brief.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): Some of the CAMHS waiting lists now sit at five years, so we really need to support the third sector. Two local third sector mental health organisations in my area are in danger of closing because of a lack of funding from the local council. Is it not the issue that the third sector is generally financed through the local council, whereas statutory services are financed through the NHS? How can the Scottish Government ensure that those vital third sector organisations are properly funded, and that more pressure is not heaped on statutory services?

Maree Todd: First, let me be absolutely clear that, in the last quarter of this year—up to September this year—we have seen the best ever performance for CAMHS that has been reported since the 18-week standard was introduced in 2014.

There are challenges with neurodevelopmental assessments: we do not collect sufficient data on those and we need to improve that. However, let us be clear that, although the CAMHS situation has been very difficult for a long number of years, the service is now very close to target—it is less than 1 per cent off.

I absolutely agree on community services. We have invested an extra £1 billion in local authority budgets this year, which will have an impact on

those services. As I set out in my first answer, we have specific funds to improve mental health and wellbeing for children and adults in our communities. I will ensure that those are continued.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): Is it not the case that the Government has never met its target of 90 per cent of children being seen by CAMHS within 18 weeks and that, in the past quarter, almost 30 per cent of CAMHS referrals were rejected? How is the Government meant to deal with that positively when it has cut the mental health budget by 1 per cent in real terms and there has been a cash cut of £20 million year to year?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Answer as briefly as possible, minister.

Maree Todd: There are a few things to correct in that question—I apologise, Presiding Officer.

We have not cut the budget. The draft 2025-26 budget increases the direct programme for mental health by 1.2 per cent to £270.5 million. In the past five years, the direct programme budget for mental health from 2021 to 2026 has more than doubled. Let me be absolutely clear that we continue to invest in mental health.

CAMHS performance is outstanding. It is at 89.1 per cent of children being seen within 18 weeks. In September, we met, and exceeded, the target. I fully expect us to attain it and then the work will be on to maintain it and make further improvements across the board in mental health.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I apologise to members whom I was not able to call.

NHS Grampian Bed Capacity

3. Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how it is supporting NHS Grampian to increase bed capacity, particularly in light of increased demand during the winter period. (S6O-04131)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): I appreciate the interest that Jackie Dunbar and other constituency members have shown in the issue and the involvement that they have had in it.

My officials and I have met regularly with the leadership of NHS Grampian to progress immediate steps and a sustainable plan to ease capacity pressures, with a focus on improving patient flow through the system, preventing ambulance turnaround delays and discharging patients as soon as they are medically fit.

We continue to support and monitor all health boards to ensure that all possible actions are taken to support services and safeguard patient safety during the winter period. Planning for this

winter builds on the effective measures that have supported our health and social care services in previous years.

Jackie Dunbar: I understand that, in colder months, additional strain and pressure on bed capacity are added to our healthcare services due to folk not being familiar with where they should access the most appropriate care in their individual circumstances. How is the Scottish Government working to ensure that folk receive the right care in the right place at the right time this winter?

Neil Gray: Jackie Dunbar's question is timely. That issue was part of the visit that I carried out to the Scottish Ambulance Service in Edinburgh this morning, ostensibly to thank staff for their incredible work and the sacrifice that they make at this time of year but also to demonstrate the clear pathways that are available to patients over the winter, when we all understand the pressures that there are across the system.

To ensure that people know where to seek urgent care this winter, we relaunched the right care, right place campaign this October. The campaign has been designed to communicate the appropriate use of urgent care services, specifically accident and emergency, in an effort to help to reduce the pressures that are felt across the system. The clear messages are that, for advice on minor illnesses and injuries, people should visit [nhsinform.scot](https://www.nhsinform.scot) and that by checking the NHS inform symptom checker, people can easily get the health information that they need to safely treat their symptoms at home. Also, people should call their general practice or NHS 24 on 111 for urgent but non-life-threatening health conditions and always to call 999 in an emergency.

Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con): Last week, Aberdeenshire health and social care partnership emphasised that

"there has been no funding from Scottish Government to support initiatives to manage seasonal pressures".

Crucially, it added:

"As such, there are limited additional levers that can be introduced to manage surges in demand at this time".

Given that NHS Grampian is already at crisis point, how can the Scottish National Party Government seriously expect community health and social care services to tackle rising demand when they have not been given the resources to address it?

Neil Gray: The funding of our health and social care partnerships is not just for the Government to consider. It involves local decisions that are taken by health boards and local authorities.

However, I encourage all health and social care partnerships that have a plan for increasing capacity and that wish to have greater support to come forward: our door is open to those considerations and discussions, just as it is to the discussions that are on-going with NHS Grampian on a sustainable model to respond to the critical incident that happened.

I encourage the continuation of our weekly engagement through the charging for residential accommodation guidance, so that if there are any areas of concern across the country, they can be addressed at either a local or national level.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I will need a bit more brevity, in the responses in particular but also in the questions.

General Practitioner Provision (Franchising)

4. **Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to prevent the emergence of a franchise model of GP provision. (S6O-04132)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): The Scottish Government believes that the independent contractor model is the profession's preferred one, and is committed to maintaining that model to ensure that general practice remains an attractive profession.

The GP contract regulations require all GP practice partners to be sufficiently engaged in providing primary medical services in Scotland. The Government recently consulted the profession on whether the contract regulations are appropriate, and we are now analysing the consultation results.

Oliver Mundell: I thank the cabinet secretary for that answer. However, some GP partners are clearly abusing the system by putting themselves forward in multiple practices, not seeing patients, not being involved in patient care and certainly not being present on site. There is one such example in my constituency, in Upper Nithsdale. I have raised the issue with the health board, and the health board pointed back to the contract. However, I do not think that the contract is sufficiently robust to ensure that patients are safe.

Neil Gray: I appreciate Oliver Mundell raising the issue. Obviously, it is primarily a matter for the health board to deal with. However, if he has evidence of such a situation—or if any other colleagues do—I would be more than interested to see that evidence and to see what can be done to address the situation.

Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP): I welcome the cabinet secretary's remarks on franchising. However, alarmingly, many primary care providers, including GPs, have cited

concerns about the sustainability of their practice models following the harsh announcement from Labour's Westminster colleagues that employer national insurance contributions will be increased. What steps is the Scottish Government taking to protect and increase primary care provision across Scotland in the light of that United Kingdom Government policy, which, in essence, will cut public funding by the back door?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That question is not strictly related to franchise models, but I will call the cabinet secretary.

Neil Gray: The sustainability of general practices and primary care service delivery is of grave concern to me and to colleagues in the British Medical Association. Iain Morrison, the chair of the Scottish general practitioners committee, has described the national insurance rise as "potentially a substantial blow" that could lead to patients suffering. We estimate that the increase might cost between £520 million and £580 million for directly employed public sector employees, and a further £210 million for those who are contracted to deliver services from the third sector. That is a significant issue of grave concern, and the UK Government must resolve the problem that it has created.

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): An Audit Scotland report on whether the 2018 general medical services contract has been working effectively is due to be published in April 2025. Recent workforce statistics have shown that there has been an increase in the GP to patient ratio—currently, there is one GP for every 1,743 patients. Can the Government offer the public and doctors any reassurance that the worsening problem is being addressed?

Neil Gray: We remain committed to increasing the number of GPs in Scotland. GP headcount is consistently more than 5,000, and the number of GPs has increased by 307 since 2017.

However, I recognise that there is an issue. We are taking forward the GP attraction and retention plan, which has been welcomed by the Royal College of General Practitioners and the BMA, because we recognise that the record 1,200 GPs who are in training need to come into practice in Scotland, so that we can address Carol Mochan's concerns. I am absolutely focused on delivering that.

Burghead and Hopeman Nurse-led Service Pilot Proposal

5. Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what consideration it has given to the proposal from save our surgeries in Burghead and Hopeman to pilot a nurse-led service in the villages following

the closure of their general practitioner surgeries. (S6O-04133)

The Minister for Public Health and Women's Health (Jenni Minto): The Scottish Government has carefully considered the save our surgeries group proposal, but, unfortunately, it is not in a position to fund a pilot nurse-led service in the villages.

We recently announced the investment of £13.6 million of immediate stabilisation money in general practice. That money will support all GP practices to withstand cost pressures that are being faced now and will be faced in the future, but it means that there is no resource for pilot projects.

The Scottish Government would encourage NHS Grampian and Moray health and social care partnership to ensure that the needs of patients are met following the closure of their GP surgeries.

Douglas Ross: I have to say that that is a disappointing response from the minister. Health and Social Care Moray considered the pilot last week and said that it could look at it further, but only if the Scottish Government provided ring-fenced funding for it. I ask the minister to consider it again. Can she tell members what value she has put on the pilot? If she has ruled it out, I presume that she must know how much it was going to cost.

Jenni Minto: I thank Douglas Ross for his question and recognise the work that he has done to support the communities. Officials are also working on guidance on branch closures for boards and integration joint boards. Stakeholders will be consulted in the new year.

We are also considering whether best practice guidance can be developed on exploring community-led solutions when delivery plans or estate strategies result in the withdrawal of services for owned or leased buildings. That is something that I am aware of. As I said in my response to Mr Ross's initial question, money has been diverted into other areas, which, unfortunately, does not allow us to put any funding into the pilot this year.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 6 is from Michelle Thomson, who is joining us remotely.

Psychological Support for People with Long-Term Conditions

6. Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how its increased funding for mental health services will help improve access to psychological support for people with long-term conditions, such as inflammatory bowel disease. (S6O-04134)

The Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport (Maree Todd): Mental health is an absolute priority for the Government. Even in the context of the past few difficult financial years, we have continued to invest wisely. We have record numbers of staff providing more varied mental health support and services to a larger number of people than ever before, including psychological support for people with long-term conditions such as inflammatory bowel disease.

The majority of spending on mental health is delivered through NHS board budgets. We expect NHS boards to deliver healthcare services that are safe and effective and that put people at the centre of their care.

Michelle Thomson: The minister might be aware that, last week, IBD UK launched a new report on care for people with Crohn's disease and colitis across Scotland. The report highlights that, despite the severe impact that such conditions can have on a person's mental health, none of the 18 adult IBD services in Scotland that responded met the IBD standards for multidisciplinary team staffing, and there was a lack of adequate provision for psychologists across all the services. Indeed, four in five patients reported not being asked about their mental health needs.

What consideration has the Scottish Government been able to give thus far to the concerns raised in the IBD UK report, including about the growing mental health need among people with long-term health conditions?

Maree Todd: The Scottish Government welcomes the recently published report by IBD UK. We will consider the report's findings carefully to ensure that all people in Scotland who are living with IBD are able to access the best possible care.

Our mental health and wellbeing strategy lays out our approach to ensuring that anyone can get the right support for their mental health, including people whose mental health has been affected by an inflammatory bowel condition. We published the national specification for psychological therapies and interventions in September 2023, setting out the standards to which we expect psychological therapies and interventions to be delivered, which include appropriate staffing.

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): More than 50,000 people in Scotland live with Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis—Scotland has the highest prevalence of any country in the UK. I know that the minister is aware of that, because she attended one of our events last year.

The existence of IBD nurses has transformed the experiences of patients such as Mareta, who spoke to the group. She lost her IBD nurse in her local service, but it is a life-saving specialism. Is

the minister willing to meet me and others to discuss the IBD nurse service? The specialist service has fundamentally changed people's health experiences, and we need to ensure that that is covered across Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: As briefly as possible, minister.

Maree Todd: I would be more than happy to commit to that. It might lie in my colleague Jenny Minto's portfolio, but I would be more than happy to commit her time to that endeavour.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Easily done.

National Health Service Funding

7. Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what the expected health outcomes will be of the proposed increase in funding for Scotland's NHS, as announced in the recent 2025-26 budget statement. (S6O-04135)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): The recent 2025-26 budget statement proposes a record £21.7 billion in funding for health and social care in Scotland, which will help patients to get appointments quicker and receive treatment sooner. Our investment aims to improve the patient experience, ensuring that the journey from diagnosis to treatment and then to aftercare is as straightforward and stress-free as possible. We have also committed to providing £200 million to reduce waiting times and improve capacity in order to make the system more efficient and reduce delayed discharges. As a result, we expect an extra 150,000 patients to be treated by March 2026.

Bill Kidd: Thank you, cabinet secretary. I welcome, in particular, the fact that my constituents will benefit from an uplift in direct investment in NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde amounting to almost £400 million. Will the cabinet secretary join me in encouraging my fellow MSPs on the Opposition benches to support the Government's 2025-26 budget and ensure that constituents across Scotland see the benefit of the highest-ever funding for Scotland's NHS since devolution?

Neil Gray: Yes, I will. In my answer to Jackie Baillie, I made that exact point. We recognise that the budget is about addressing issues in the health service. The health service needs the budget to pass. The Opposition parties in this Parliament cannot just will the end; they must will the means as well.

The budget includes an investment of more than £16.2 billion in our health boards, representing a 3 per cent cash uplift, which is a real-terms increase

in baseline funding to support vital front-line services. It also includes £139 million of additional investment across NHS infrastructure to support improvement and renewal. It is a budget by Scotland for Scotland that focuses on delivering progress and lays the foundations for Scotland's long-term success. I encourage all MSPs across the chamber to support it.

National Health Service Dentist Registrations

8. Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what it is doing to increase active patient registrations with NHS dentists. (S6O-04136)

The Minister for Public Health and Women's Health (Jenni Minto): The primary aim of dental payment reform that was introduced in November 2023 is to improve access by incentivising dentists to remain in the NHS and thereby provide longer-term sustainability to the dental sector. Through payment reform, the Scottish Government has made a meaningful whole-scale intervention for the sector and has introduced a realistic package of fees that better reflects the costs of delivering modern primary care dentistry.

The latest official statistics show that, between the introduction of reform and the end of September 2024, almost 4 million courses of treatment had been delivered to patients.

Claire Baker: In Fife, some 84 per cent of the population are registered with NHS services, but that does not equate to access to dentistry. Only 63 per cent of those who are registered have seen a dentist in the past two years, which means that close to half the people in Fife are not registered with an NHS dentist or have not seen an NHS dentist over that period. Almost 41,500 people in Fife are not registered with an NHS dentist, and more than 9,000 of those are children. In addition, no dentists in Fife are registering new patients. Although four practices are running a waiting list, they expect people to have to wait for more than a year.

I understand that Fife, Dunfermline, Glenrothes and Kirkcaldy have been included in the Scottish dental access initiative, but what else is the Government doing? When will we see progress being made in Fife to allow people to access NHS dentistry?

Jenni Minto: I recognise the issues that Claire Baker has raised, which we are addressing. We are working very closely with NHS Fife to ensure that it—alongside independent dentists—can provide the appropriate service.

For example, there has been an increase in the public service dental workforce, and the health board has provided a phone line. Further to that, I am working closely with colleagues across the

United Kingdom, including the Minister of State for Care, Stephen Kinnock, to ensure that we can increase the number of dentists who come to the UK to provide the important services that we need.

Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP): I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests: I hold a bank nurse contract with NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde.

I welcome the fact that the level of registration is significantly higher in Scotland than it is in the rest of the UK, with more than 95 per cent of Scotland's population being registered with an NHS dentist. However, I recognise that the problem of the recruitment and retention of dentists poses a threat to accessibility to services for registered patients. What steps is the Scottish Government taking to overcome that issue, particularly in areas where the problem is most acute?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please be very brief, minister.

Jenni Minto: I will be.

The initiatives that are under consideration include increased multidisciplinary working in dental practice to make better use of all our workforce. In addition, as I indicated, we are doing cross-UK work to improve the number of international dentists.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I apologise to those members I was unable to call. We have gone a little over time, but we are pressed for time across the afternoon.

That ends portfolio question time. There will be a brief pause before we move on to the next item of business, to allow front-bench members to change places.

Education (Scotland) Bill: Stage 1

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-15876, in the name of Jenny Gilruth, on the Education (Scotland) Bill at stage 1. I advise members that there is no time in hand this afternoon.

14:50

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): I am pleased to present the Education (Scotland) Bill and set out its general principles to Parliament. I start by thanking the Education, Children and Young People Committee for its considered work on the bill and its insightful stage 1 report. I pay tribute to Sue Webber for her convenership of the committee, which, in my opinion, is the most important in the Parliament. Sue Webber's devotion to improving the lives of Scotland's children and young people has been unwavering. Although we differ on party politics, I welcomed her approach to collaborative politics for the greater good.

I welcome the committee's support for the general principles of the bill at stage 1. It is clear that, across the chamber, there is much that we all agree on, including the need for education reform. The status quo is not working. In a Parliament of minorities, the duty falls on all of us to ensure that we work together to deliver for the people who we represent. I know that each of us cares deeply about improving Scottish education and understands the urgency behind education reform. The pandemic fundamentally changed Scotland's schools and, post-pandemic, standing still is not an option. Scotland's children, teachers, lecturers, parents and carers expect the Parliament to work together to bring about reform.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): We will support the bill at stage 1. However, I hope that the cabinet secretary understands that there are deep concerns and that the bill will require fundamental amendments. Will she be open to making those changes?

Jenny Gilruth: Mr Rennie will know from our meeting yesterday that I am very open to engaging with the Opposition parties on a range of amendments. The fundamental point that I am making in my opening statement is that the need and impetus for reform are very real. There is limited time between now and the 2026 election, so I am very keen to make progress on the bill and deliver on those expectations, notwithstanding the member's challenge. I am happy to engage with him and any other member on that point.

I thank all the stakeholders who have contributed their views on the bill thus far. When I

reflect on the impetus for reform that they have expressed, I look back on my experiences in the classroom, on my time as a member of the Education and Skills Committee in the previous parliamentary session, and on the historical challenges that we have experienced with the qualifications body.

I have listened carefully to the Parliament's views on the Scottish Qualifications Authority, and I know that rebuilding trust with Scotland's teachers will be critical. That is why, as I have previously set out to the Parliament, reform is not in itself a panacea. Cultural change in both Government and our agencies will be essential if we are to build a new qualifications system that carries the credence that children, parents and the teaching profession will expect.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): I agree with Jenny Gilruth about the need for a change of culture. Does that mean that she can assure the Parliament that, when the new bodies are formed, the same people will not simply occupy the same chairs, or different chairs, in the same boardroom?

Jenny Gilruth: The member raises an important point, which was addressed when I gave evidence to the committee in October. We are talking about people's employment rights, and the member should be mindful of that. However, I recognise the challenge in that regard and I commit to working with him on that point and on a range of other options in relation to reform.

In my statement on the national improvement framework last week, I set out the long-term vision for education in Scotland, which was a key response to an ask from the committee. The bill is a really important step towards that vision and I look forward to returning in the new year, subject to parliamentary business, to fully debate our actions to drive improvement. This bill is not the final step in our education reform agenda; rather, it is the first step that will provide the structure that our system needs to ensure that teachers, families and pupils have confidence in our schools and in the assessments that are provided.

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): Given that accreditation will remain within the qualifications body, does the cabinet secretary believe that the proposed structure is sufficient and will be robust enough to ensure trust in that body going forward?

Jenny Gilruth: We discussed that at the education committee in October. The member raises an important point about accreditation. In recent times, there have been some challenges in that regard. I commit to the Parliament today that I will look at that point in more detail. I am more than happy to work with the member on it. Other

members have also raised issues about accreditation. We looked at a range of different options for where accreditation could sit. I note that the committee recommended that it be moved to the Scottish credit and qualifications framework. That would not be without challenge. However, I am more than happy to work with the member on that matter.

We recognise the need for a new qualifications body to provide more independence and credibility in how we accredit qualifications more broadly. It is really important that we build back trust with the teaching profession and also with Scotland's parents and carers.

As the committee has discussed, the bill can be seen as the scaffolding that supports a range of education reforms. Those reforms build on evidence, including findings from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and Professor Ken Muir. Of course, a number of non-legislative reforms are already moving forward, including the curriculum improvement cycle.

Furthermore, I want to see more opportunities for Scotland's teachers to draw on the best research to develop their own practice. That is why we are establishing the centre for teaching excellence, which will work closely with teachers and national education organisations. I am delighted to say that, through a competitive process, we have identified the University of Glasgow as the host institution. I am very grateful to the other institutions that came forward with an interest, showing the world-class strength of our academic institutions across Scotland. It is fitting that the new centre will be based in Glasgow, which was announced as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's new learning city earlier this month. We will now work with the university to take forward the establishment of the centre so that we can, at pace, offer those important opportunities to Scotland's teachers.

The way that the new qualifications body will work with schools needs to feel different for teachers. To support that, I have committed to seconding a secondary headteacher into qualifications Scotland. That headteacher will lead a dedicated schools unit in the organisation and, working closely with teachers and pupils in secondary schools, they will help to support qualifications delivery. The post will be advertised in the new year, and I strongly encourage interested secondary headteachers from across Scotland to apply.

The establishment of qualifications Scotland and the office of His Majesty's chief inspector of education in Scotland is fundamentally about improving pupil and learner outcomes and supporting our teachers. For too long, our national

education bodies have been distant from the people they serve. Too often, they are perceived as being an impediment to delivering excellent teaching or, worse, as lacking credibility with the profession. For credibility to be restored, pupils and teachers must be at the heart of decision making, and that is exactly what the bill is intended to achieve. The new requirement for the board of qualifications Scotland to include practising teachers and a person with knowledge of the interests of those who are undertaking qualifications will provide greater diversity and challenge.

The creation of the learner and teacher charters, which will be developed with people who use our education system, will further provide greater transparency and accountability by providing the opportunity for greater involvement in decisions that affect and impact education. The bill seeks to enshrine the independence of inspection and move the balance of power from ministers to the inspectorate. Although that is significant, it will not be unfamiliar territory for many of Scotland's teachers. The move will increase public confidence in the independence of inspection and, perhaps most important, ensure that the strengths and challenges that are identified really drive improvement.

The ways that our schools are inspected also require to be updated post-pandemic. With the previous iteration of "How good is our school?" being published back in 2015, the need for change is clear. Work to refresh the framework for school inspections has already begun, and significant engagement, including with teachers, local authorities, parents and carers, as well as with children and young people, has been at the heart of that process. The bill builds on that and will establish an advisory council that will bring in wider perspectives while maintaining the crucial independence of inspection.

I have listened to the views of stakeholders and committee members that the bill should be further strengthened, and I have responded to the recommendations that the Education, Children and Young People Committee made in its stage 1 report. I agree that the bill's provisions need to deliver the necessary separation between the awarding and accreditation functions of qualifications Scotland in order to deliver transparency, integrity and fairness. The specific governance and accountability provision in the bill includes the new requirement for ministers to appoint a convener of the accreditation committee. However, as I intimated to Pam Duncan-Glancy, I am open to looking again at how we can further strengthen that provision. The convener will have a new and direct advisory relationship with ministers, along with new commitments for separate accountability and reporting.

Some members and stakeholders believe that we need to go further, which is why I have commissioned the chair of the SQA to advise on how to deliver greater administrative separation between the two functions in qualifications Scotland.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind): Does the cabinet secretary agree that a lot of the issues around independence and separation arise because of the attitude of people as much as the legal lines?

Jenny Gilruth: I am more than happy to speak to the member about that. Perhaps he can give me more detail on it outwith the debate. However, I recognise the challenge in relation to accreditation. I have already committed to working with the chair, having commissioned further advice on that, and I have said to Parliament today that I am happy to work with members on that option through the legislation.

I am conscious of time, Deputy Presiding Officer. The Education (Scotland) Bill is an important step forward in creating an education system that allows teachers to deliver excellent teaching and pupils to fulfil their full potential. We may disagree on some aspects, but there is willingness across the chamber to support the general principles of the bill and to listen to and consider one another's views and ideas. In that spirit, I hope that Parliament will agree to the general principles of the Education (Scotland) Bill today.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees to the general principles of the Education (Scotland) Bill.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I invite members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons.

15:01

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I am pleased to speak on behalf of the Education, Children and Young People Committee about our scrutiny of the Education (Scotland) Bill.

As the relatively new convener of the committee, I came to the bill late on, during stage 1. I am extremely grateful for the work that was done by my predecessor, Sue Webber. I thank her for her stewardship of the committee as it looked in detail at the bill. I have watched some of the evidence sessions and read the material that was submitted to the committee, and I thank all the individuals and organisations that provided evidence, either in person or by responding to our calls for views. I also thank the committee's clerking team and my colleagues on the committee, including former members of the

committee who were involved in the evidence gathering, for their diligent work on the bill so far.

Part 1 of the bill seeks to create a new qualifications body with strengthened separation of its awarding and accrediting functions, and increased influence for educators and learners. It was clear from the evidence that we received that the SQA has lost the trust of learners, their families and teachers. There has been a lack of transparency in the way that the SQA has conducted its business, and it has poorly communicated with many of those who take and teach its qualifications. The committee recognises that the new body will have much to do to win back that trust.

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): Will the member give way?

Douglas Ross: Yes.

Martin Whitfield: I am very grateful to Douglas Ross for taking an intervention. Was he as disappointed as I was by the Scottish Government's response to the committee's report, particularly in relation to the SQA? Having heard what the cabinet secretary said today, does he have any confidence that the Scottish Government will move far enough to meet the recommendations that the committee has made with regard to the SQA?

Douglas Ross: I was warned within an inch of my life to be very careful about the speech that I am delivering as the convener of the committee. Perhaps I may intervene later and give more personal opinions on the issue, if Mr Whitfield will allow—[*Laughter.*—]—but I take on board the point that he made.

In our report, we make it clear that the measures to strengthen the separation of the awarding and accrediting functions are not strong enough and need to be enhanced, whether to the extent that they sit in separate bodies or remain within the same body but with appropriate structures and sufficient resourcing to ensure that the two functions are independent of each other.

In the cabinet secretary's response to the committee's report, she highlighted the advice that she had commissioned from the chair of the SQA

“to review the organisational design and leadership structures to further enhance the distinction between the two functions”.

She confirmed that that advice has been received. It would be helpful if she could give an indication of what that advice is and the options that she is considering as a result, either now or when she winds up the debate later.

The Scottish Government is currently chairing a short-life working group that is considering the

scope of accreditation. In her response to the committee, the cabinet secretary set out details of the group's work, which is welcome. In correspondence last week, she said that, through education reform and the bill, there is an opportunity to improve the oversight of qualifications. Does she anticipate that there will be amendments to the bill as a result of that group's work?

As I have already mentioned, the SQA has often been criticised, over many years, for the way that it communicates with learners and educators. The committee understands that the bill seeks to enhance and formalise the roles of both groups, including the roles that they will have in the governance of the new body, qualifications Scotland. The committee agrees that that is important to those taking and those delivering the qualifications and assessments, and that they should be represented and included in the governance arrangements.

In our report, we sought more detail on the measures that are proposed for the governance of qualifications Scotland, including in relation to the membership of the strategic advisory council; on ensuring that registered teachers who are appointed to the board are current classroom teachers; and on ensuring that learners, teachers and practitioners make up the majority of their respective interest panels. The committee notes the cabinet secretary's response on those points, including her commitment to lodge amendments at stage 2 to ensure that learners and educators are the majority group on the relevant interest committee.

The committee heard that a key component of the new qualifications body rebuilding trust in the sector would be to ensure that both learners and educators were consulted widely and inclusively, with clear feedback loops in place to report back on any action taken. However, we heard that, with some measures, such as the learner interest committee, the bill would largely formalise current engagement practices, some of which are practices that were criticised in the past. With other aspects, such as the strategic advisory council, the proposals in the bill substantially replicate the legislation that was established to create the SQA's advisory council. As such, it was not clear to the committee how those measures would lead to an improvement in the governance of the new qualifications body.

In the cabinet secretary's response to our report, she states that the learner interest committee will be

"a key, immovable and explicit component within the organisation's governance structure",

which has not been the case with the current Scottish learner panel. However, I am not sure that that is the reassurance that the committee is looking for, which is that things will be significantly different for the new body.

The committee also heard from many people about the importance of not only creating mechanisms to hear from learners but ensuring that such forums were age appropriate and supportive of meaningful participation. The Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland young advisers group suggested that a young advisers group, similar to the model used by the CYPCS, be set up to influence the qualifications body, noting that

"most children and young people would feel better in a space only for children and young people".

I note from the cabinet secretary's response that the Scottish Government will, ahead of stage 2, consider the issue further and explore options to best ensure that the meaningful participation of children and young people indeed takes place.

Part 2 of the bill establishes the office of His Majesty's chief inspector of education in Scotland. A key aim of the bill is to strengthen the independence of the inspectorate, but those giving evidence repeatedly stressed the importance of the inspectorate not only being independent but being seen to be independent, and the committee heard mixed views as to whether the current proposals provide sufficient independence.

Professor Graham Donaldson was head of Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education from 2002 to 2010, when the inspectorate was last a single body, before it became part of Education Scotland. He stated that he had more operational independence than the chief inspector of education would have under the terms of the bill. He called for amendments to "enshrine the independence" of the role of chief inspector.

The committee also heard calls for the bill to explicitly set out the purpose of the inspections that the inspectorate would carry out. The committee believes that that would be helpful and I would welcome the cabinet secretary clearly setting out the purpose of the inspections in her response to today's debate. It would also be helpful to hear what types of inspections the inspectorate would realistically carry out. The committee appreciates that the bill provides the inspectorate with an opportunity to broaden its inspection programme beyond current school inspections. However, in practice, without increased resources, it is unlikely to be able to do that. The Scottish Government could manage expectations of the new inspectorate by confirming that it will be resourced to do more or by accepting that it will be largely resourced to the same level

as it is now and therefore not expected to do much more.

In our report, we recognised the volume of people responding to our calls for views who expressed their frustration that the bill focuses purely on structural change and does not progress wider educational reforms such as those that the Hayward review proposed.

When the cabinet secretary came to the committee, she said that she could not deliver on the aspirations of the Hayward review without reform of the qualifications body. Therefore, it would be helpful if the cabinet secretary could give more detail on how she intends to deliver on those aspirations, providing that the bill is passed, and when she envisages such changes being made.

In our report, the committee agreed with the general principles of the bill. However, we believe that the bill will require substantial amendment to ensure that the improvements that the Scottish Government envisaged—in relation to engagement, governance, organisational culture and accountability—become a reality for learners, teachers and staff.

I look forward to hearing more, during the debate, about potential amendments from the cabinet secretary, members of the committee and members across the Parliament, because it is clearly in all our interests to ensure that the bill gets it right and leads to new bodies that hold the confidence of learners, parents and carers, and teaching professionals.

15:11

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): I, too, thank the clerks to the Education, Children and Young People Committee for the power of work that they have put into the Education (Scotland) Bill to date and I thank all the people who were involved in our evidence sessions.

As has been stated, there have been significant changes to the membership of the committee during the inquiry period. As the cabinet secretary did—and because it is the season of good will—I pay tribute to all the members who have been involved in the process, especially my Scottish Conservative colleagues Liam Kerr and the former committee convener, Sue Webber, for their positive contributions to the work of the committee over this parliamentary session.

I also thank all the external organisations in the wider educational sector for their helpful briefings and their contribution to the debate so far.

As has been mentioned, the Education (Scotland) Bill will replace the SQA with a new body, qualifications Scotland, and transfer

inspection duties to a new office, His Majesty's chief inspector of education in Scotland.

It is important that we remember why we are here today with this bill in its current form. In 2020, the introduction of the reformed examination system was criticised after a series of administrative and computer errors led to several thousand incorrect higher and intermediate certificates being sent out to candidates. In 2021, the Scottish Government announced that it would scrap the SQA after the body was condemned for the exam results fiasco during the Covid-19 pandemic. If we fast forward to today, there is cross-party agreement that we need change and reform in order to re-establish confidence in the qualifications and inspection structures and organisations in Scotland.

I believe that the committee report is a helpful guide for ministers now to significantly strengthen the bill and I look forward to the discussions that the cabinet secretary and I will have in the new year around the stage 2 amendments that Scottish Conservatives want to see.

As Douglas Ross, the new, neutral education committee convener stated, the committee's report seeks guarantees around oversight of qualifications Scotland—in particular, that teachers, students and families

“will be able to share their views in an appropriate way to develop public faith in the body”.

He also said that the newly independent inspectorate will be

“able to challenge Scottish Ministers and education authorities”.

Perhaps most limited in detail at present is how the inspectorate will be

“responsible for scrutinising national bodies including Qualifications Scotland and Education Scotland.”

I know that the former teacher in the cabinet secretary will, rightly, always insist that members do their homework by reading the conclusions of the committee report, and those conclusions will not have escaped the cabinet secretary. The report reflects widespread “frustration” about the “slow pace” of educational reform, and I hope that the cabinet secretary has taken that on board.

It is still not clear where genuine reform will take place and what vision the Government has for Education Scotland. I believe that, in its current form, the bill is a missed opportunity to reform that organisation. Although not part of the bill's provisions, the Scottish Government has stated that Education Scotland will no longer be replaced but will be “refocused” in order to

“lead curriculum design, delivery and improvement”,

although we have not yet seen any detail of what that looks like.

In the time that I have today, I will touch on a number of areas where Scottish Conservatives want to see significant progress at stage 2.

Good leadership and accountability are absolutely key, and ministers must get this right if we are to build the trust of teachers, parents and carers and, most important, pupils and candidates who are sitting exams. As with all successful boards, diversity of representation on the qualifications Scotland board is critical and needs to be right, in order to provide the voices, skills and experiences that are needed to guide the organisation. I believe that the committee recommendations, if taken forward, will help to achieve that.

I also note a number of other concerns, specifically in relation to the status of British Sign Language in the bill and in the Scottish Languages Bill that is currently making its way through Parliament. I welcome the Scottish Government's response to the committee's report and I hope that ministers will support the committee's recommendation that

"BSL should have parity of esteem with Gaelic throughout the Bill."

Only that approach will guarantee that the rights of deaf children and young people are upheld. I hope that we will see those amendments lodged at stage 2.

I also note the concerns that were raised by the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland in relation to child protection and the potential inspection gap around child protection and safeguarding in schools. I hope that the minister will clarify that issue in her closing speech.

I believe that the bill presents an opportunity for the emerging organisations to be more accountable to Parliament. In recent weeks, it has become apparent that we need a greater scrutiny role, and I hope that ministers will agree to significantly strengthen that in the bill.

Finally, the area that we on the Conservative benches want to see taken forward is the reform of Education Scotland. The bill is a missed opportunity to reduce bureaucracy in the classroom; for example, in relation to all teachers being asked for evidence when requesting extra time for candidates, or in relation to ideas—which teachers have been talking about for a long time—to reduce the workload by providing support for teachers and curriculum for excellence resources in the classroom, which have not been taken forward by Education Scotland.

The future of Education Scotland is important, and I hope that ministers will urgently outline their vision and the details to Parliament so that we can all contribute to what it will look like.

The Scottish Government must ensure the strong accountability of the new bodies and a more coherent vision for education reform in Scotland. It is clear that ministers plan a very tight timetable for the establishment of those new bodies and functions. Although that is understandable, it will present challenges and there is the potential for failure.

The Scottish Conservatives will support the general principles of the bill at decision time, but we do so with the qualification that we need to see significant changes to the bill at stages 2 and 3.

The SQA's reputation has been damaged in recent years, with the recent controversy over higher history marking just the latest concern to undermine confidence in the organisation. However, ministers must also take responsibility, having dithered over delivering reforms in recent years. What ministers are currently proposing in the bill feels like little more than a cosmetic name change. Parliament has an opportunity to build a much stronger bill.

If the Scottish Government is serious about restoring Scotland's once world-leading education reputation, it must change its current approach and produce meaningful plans to deliver the change that our education system so desperately needs. If ministers are bold and imaginative in delivering a more accountable and transparent vision—one that can help to build a qualifications organisation and an inspection system that deliver for pupils, teachers, parents and carers—they will have our support.

I look forward to stages 2 and 3.

15:18

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): I am pleased to open on behalf of Scottish Labour. I thank my committee colleagues and all the organisations, individuals, pupils, parents and teachers and staff in schools across the country who gave evidence to the committee on the bill.

It is fair to say that education reform has been keenly anticipated for some time. Sadly, the bill falls short of expectations, recommendations and the hopes of many people for change. Scottish Labour agrees with teachers, parents, pupils, trade unions, the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland and countless experts on reviews that the SQA needs to be abolished, the inspectorate needs to be independent and the curriculum in the senior phase needs to align with

what young people want and need from the education system.

The bill before us today was an opportunity to do that—to bring about necessary reform and, crucially, to restore trust in the qualifications and other education bodies in Scotland—but, without amendment, I worry that that opportunity could be missed.

Jenny Gilruth: I hope that the member heard, at the committee and in the chamber today, my willingness to engage on amendments. Is it the Scottish Labour Party's position to vote in favour of the general principles of the bill tonight, as the member did when serving on the committee?

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I will come on to explain the position that my party will take this evening, and I will allude to the committee's recommendations.

Reform is essential. Last week, statistics showed that 40 per cent of pupils in Scotland have additional support needs but that, at the same time, the number of ASN teachers has fallen. In addition, they showed that one in three children are absent from school and, far from recruiting more teachers, teacher numbers are falling. On top of that, they also showed that exam results have declined this year and that the attainment gap is the widest on record for highers and advanced highers.

Everything is going in the wrong direction, but opportunities are being denied. It is of huge regret that the bill does not address the scale and reality of decline. It is not just me saying that. The Educational Institute of Scotland has said:

"it is difficult to see how it will provide the necessary separation of functions to deliver the independence, and importantly the perception of independence, required to build professional and public trust in the new body."

In addition, the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland said that the bill will

"barely move us forward in addressing deeper issues impacting the provision of education".

Furthermore, in a parent survey by Connect, a parent said that the bill feels little more than a rebrand of the SQA.

In the face of all that critique, I am afraid that the Government's response to the committee report is disappointing. I welcome the cabinet secretary's indication that she will work with all parties, but she will need to move on from her response to the committee if that is to be meaningful engagement.

Fundamentally, though, I am concerned that the bill that the Government has introduced fails to deliver on its stated purpose. The Government says that that purpose is to create an organisational infrastructure for education in

Scotland that more effectively supports the system. In not splitting the accreditation function from the qualifications body, it does not achieve that aim.

The overwhelming evidence to the committee suggested that responsibility for accreditation should not sit with the new body. The cabinet secretary, in her written response, said:

"The Scottish Government undertook a full exploration of alternative locations for the accreditation function."

However, the Government has not yet explained why the different bodies considered would not be suitable alternatives. It beggars belief that the Government appears to have come to that conclusion on the strength of advice that was commissioned from the chair of the SQA. The splitting of the accreditation function will be vital if Scottish Labour is to support the bill at stage 3.

The Government also says that the intention through the bill is to support the right balance of responsibility and autonomy between different parts of the system, but the bill does not do that either. The balance is all wrong. Crucial voices are left out of the proposed learner and teacher committees, the charters lack teeth and there is no clear link between the strategic advisory committee and the interest committees. The absence of representation for teaching trade unions on the board of the new qualifications body will risk trust falling before the body is even set up and is unacceptable.

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): You will recall that some of the evidence that we heard at committee was that, at some point, we have to say no to some of the many interest groups being included. Their representation cannot be limitless; we cannot include everybody.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Always speak through the chair.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: The member makes a very good point, but the fact of the matter is that there is no guarantee of any particular representation on the committee as the bill stands. The Government will have to address that and provide more clarity, particularly on the absence of trade unions and teaching trade unions on the board of the SQA.

The bill as drafted also means that the independent inspectorate will be accountable to Government ministers rather than Parliament, leading experts to suggest, as we have heard, that the chief inspector will be left with fewer powers now than at present.

With no link between Education Scotland and qualifications Scotland and no mention of Withers's recommendations, the bill does not deliver the coherence in education that the

Government claims that it does, either. Crucially, one of the starkest reasons that reform is needed is what happened in 2020, on the current First Minister's watch, when the poorest pupils' grades were downgraded. On that, worryingly, the bill is lacking, too.

We agree with NASUWT that the lack of equality data hindered the SQA's ability to fully examine the 2020 approach, and we believe that any new body must have a more robust attitude towards data collection. The Scottish Government's response that existing duties are a catch-all is insufficient.

The Government has not got the principles, substance, structures or balance of power right in the bill, which is why we cannot give it our full support in its current form at this stage. The committee was clear that the bill required significant amendment.

Our ambitions for reform must be greater than this. We on the Labour benches want to deliver on the recommendations for reform of Professor Ken Muir, Professor Louise Hayward and James Withers, and, yes, we want to abolish the SQA, make the inspector independent and align curriculum with assessment. Reform on that scale would fulfil what the Government claims are the bill's purpose and principles. However, as I have set out, the bill that is before us does not do that.

It is also difficult to determine whether the bill achieves the Government's long-term vision for education, because we have yet to get the second part of that conversation, which we are told will come next year. That means that we are being asked to decide on something on which we do not yet have full information.

We do know that any vision will fall flat if the Government does not move on the key recommendations for improvement that people have set out. Those include the splitting of the accreditation function, rebalancing power, giving trade unions a place on the board, mandating robust data collection, ensuring parental representation, guaranteeing that the strategic advisory council reflects the interests of protected characteristics, and aligning qualifications Scotland and Education Scotland.

To be clear, on reform, the Government must do better than this. The bill must change significantly if it is to get our support. If the Government changes direction—I look forward to engaging with the cabinet secretary to help that to happen—and listens to the voices of those who have said that it needs to change, we will support it. If it does not, we will be behind the countless people outside this place who are calling for a change of direction.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Ross Greer to open on behalf of the Scottish Greens.

15:26

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): The bill has certainly been a long time coming. I thank everyone who has been involved, not just in the stage 1 process, but in the years of work that brought us here.

Education reform has consistently been a debate for the 25 years of devolution and, going back, long before that. However, the current cycle probably started around 2017. In that year, the Parliament's Education and Skills Committee published a report on the performance of our national education agencies—the SQA, Education Scotland, Skills Development Scotland and the Scottish Funding Council. I sat on the committee at that time, as did the cabinet secretary and Liz Smith. I apologise if I have missed anyone else who is in the chamber who was there at that point.

That report made it very clear to Parliament that Education Scotland and, in particular, the SQA had already lost the trust and confidence of the teaching profession. They were seen as out of touch and hostile to feedback. Not only could they often not communicate with teachers, young people and parents, but they could not even communicate with each other. The clearest example of that is the fact that, in curriculum for excellence, there is a course requirement of 140 hours for national 5 courses and the ability to take up to nine of those courses, but it is not possible to timetable nine times 140 hours. That is the case because Education Scotland was in charge of the number of hours that were required and the SQA was in charge of the number of national 5s that could be taken. Despite being based in the same building, they could not communicate with each other to reconcile that.

One of the areas that we most consistently heard evidence on was the slopy shoulders within education governance in Scotland. That was exemplified by the curriculum for excellence management board, which, when it was asked who was ultimately responsible for any given area, would often simply point the finger at anyone else who was in the room, rather than take responsibility itself.

I want to read out a damning conclusion from that committee report to put it on the record. It said:

“even if the SQA's position were hypothetically to be accepted, the Committee would still find it difficult to understand how the SQA has fulfilled its role to its core customers, the learners of Scotland, having produced qualifications that have led to an onerous workload, a breakdown in trust and threats of industrial action by teachers”.

That was in 2017. That same conclusion could be come to now.

A clear theme in that report, and in the OECD's review a few years later, was the lack of accountability for areas of responsibility. Education Scotland got off easy in a lot of ways, because the evidence that we collected on the SQA was so outrageous that, naturally, the focus was on it instead. Significant challenges were unearthed at Education Scotland as well, but the culture at the SQA, especially in senior management, was an area of key concern.

The committee's top conclusion at that time was:

"The evidence the Committee has received from teachers should give the SQA serious cause for concern. The Committee considers that the distinction in feedback between the Committee's survey and the SQA commissioned survey is perhaps indicative of the current relationship with teachers. There would appear to be a divergence between what teachers will express to the SQA and what they will express to this Committee. The SQA is invited to review its approach to engaging with teachers to enable candid communication from those with criticisms to make. The SQA also needs to be able to demonstrate how these views impact on the SQA's processes in order to improve trust."

Again, the same conclusion has been arrived at years later. An overhaul of communication and a reset of the relationship with teachers simply did not happen.

Fast forward to 2020, and we had the biggest scandal at the SQA since 2000, which was all the more scandalous because of the fact that the SQA and the Government had been warned for months, particularly by Iain Gray and me, about the system that it was designing and the inequalities that were baked into it. I am not ashamed of the transactional politics that happened in the aftermath of that, when, in exchange for our votes in a vote of confidence, the Greens got the grades restored and secured multiple reviews, including what became Professor Hayward's independent review of qualifications and assessment.

That allows me to make the point that the bill is only one part of a much wider reform picture. Organisational reform needs to go alongside qualification and assessment reform. I welcome the Government's commitment to more continuous assessment, but I am disappointed that Professor Hayward's recommendations have largely been rejected or kicked into the long grass. I think that we will be back here in five or 10 years' time to belatedly accept them.

The Government still has no answer to what I think was the key question that came out of the 2020 scandal. Yes, grades went up across the board, but they went up more for young people from more deprived communities, which poses the question whether exams make our attainment gap worse than it needs to be. I think that the answer

to that is yes, but I do not think that the Government has an answer to it either way.

The 2021 alternative certification model proved that continuous assessment can work. The problems were largely with workload and resulted from the decision to cancel exams being taken far too late. However, that whole experience during the pandemic highlighted the key issues of poor communication from the SQA to teachers, students and parents. The bill could be stronger on communication in particular. Section 8 in part 1 requires the strategic advisory council to be consulted, but just the SAC. I will lodge amendments at stage 2 to require wider consultation by qualifications Scotland, of teachers, young people and parents.

The communications challenges go beyond the bill. I will close my opening speech by going back to the evidence that we took recently on this year's higher history exam. One issue that arose was that the SQA cannot at present directly communicate with students or even with teachers, so it had no ability to directly tell every history teacher in Scotland or every history student what was going on. Does the Government recognise that that is an operational problem that can be resolved with the creation of the new body?

Good communications require not just good platforms but good practice, and for that a far more significant cultural change will be required.

However, I will come on to that in my closing remarks. I have been working on this issue for some time so, as you will imagine, Presiding Officer, I have far more to say than there is time for, but I will conclude now and come on to the cultural challenges and the inspectorate in closing.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Willie Rennie to open on behalf of the Scottish Liberal Democrats.

15:32

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): There is no doubt that our education system is in crisis, and it has been the top subject of political debate for many years. However, the inspectorate has played no role in blowing the whistle on any of the issues. Where was the indication from the inspectorate that Scottish educational performance was slipping down the international rankings? Where was the highlighting by the inspectorate of our serious and deep-seated problems with behaviour in the classroom? Where was the highlighting by the inspectorate of our deep problems with absence, particularly following the pandemic? The inspectorate was itself absent on all those big issues.

Then we have the SQA, which dramatically lost confidence during the pandemic as a result of the marking episode and the arrangements that it put in place, as Ross Greer has just described.

Both those organisations are absolutely essential if we are to provide robust challenge and to have confidence and trust in the organisation of education in Scotland. If our national bodies are not respected and have no authority, how can they hold local authorities to account for how they perform? Equally, how do those bodies challenge the Government? If they are weak, education is weak. That is why we need dramatic change and why we will support the bill today.

The SQA needs to be changed and we need a new qualifications body. The higher history episode of recent months shows exactly why we need a separation of the accreditation function. The fact that the chief executive—the chief examiner—did her own investigation into the performance of her organisation in that marking episode shows exactly why the system is not working. Even if it was the best review in the world, nobody would believe it, because it was not independent. It needs to be independent.

John Mason: Would the member accept that the work was reviewed externally?

Willie Rennie: The process was reviewed externally, but the involvement of the Welsh representative in the details of the review was not substantial. I hope that John Mason accepts that. Even so, review needs to be separate in order to ensure that we build confidence.

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Will the member take an intervention?

Willie Rennie: Again, I will take a brief intervention.

Liz Smith: Would Willie Rennie also accept that there is a slight concern in relation to the comments that were made by Graham Donaldson—who was a very fine HMIE, or head of inspection—who is making the point that, with the bill, there would not be the same flexibility as he had several years ago?

Willie Rennie: Yes. Those remarks speak for themselves.

We need to have separation of accreditation. However, that will not be easy, because there is not simply an accreditation unit in the SQA; rather, it is integrated within the whole organisation. We will therefore need to change the guts of the organisation in order to ensure that we can have a separate accreditation function. I understand the challenge that the minister is facing in trying to deliver what Ken Muir put in his recommendations. However, in order to instil confidence in the new

qualifications body, we need to make it happen, and I will lodge amendments in those terms.

It was identified almost from the very beginning that the inspection function needs to be separate from Education Scotland. Experts in the sector highlighted that there is no point in having the inspector as part of an agency of Government, trying to hold the Government and others to account, when they are responsible to the ministers themselves. That day was a long time coming, and the situation needed to change in order to instil confidence again.

Perception is incredibly important, so I would therefore like to explore the independence issue further with the minister when we go through the later stages of the bill. I have not been convinced that the minister can explain why she needs to retain the powers to direct the inspector. I understand that there are particular circumstances and particularly valid reasons why she has used those powers, and nobody would disagree with the application of them, but why does she need to have them? Again, independence is incredibly important to ensure that we have confidence.

Ross Greer: Will the member take an intervention?

Willie Rennie: I have taken an awful lot of interventions; I have only six minutes altogether.

Safeguarding is important to get right. It is about members of staff, not only teachers, who are below those who have been convicted or who have lost their fitness-to-teach authentication. We need a system that checks local authorities in respect of how they are dealing with members of staff who are not performing particularly well, and sometimes in respect of their not addressing the deep-seated problems that could become bigger problems at a later stage.

We need the inspectorate to provide some monitoring of local authorities in relation to their employment of individuals, in order to deal with those gaps. The General Teaching Council for Scotland has been absolutely right in highlighting that as a problem. We need to broaden the scope of the inspectorate to include inspection of councils and initial teacher education institutions, which also need to be inspected. How we inspect also needs to change.

My closing remarks are on the issue of voice. We need to be careful about who we put on all the various committees, because we could end up with the Communist Politburo if we are not careful. We also need to make sure that we listen to the boy at the back of the class, who will never speak to anybody. He will never be on a committee, or stand up in front of the qualifications body and make his voice heard, but that voice is incredibly important. I want to hear from such people and hear what they have to say, even if it is only for 20

seconds. The Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland has highlighted how that can be done, and that is one of the most important reforms that we can make.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to the open debate.

15:38

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): I am pleased to take part in the debate, particularly in my relatively new role as deputy convener of the Education, Children and Young People Committee. Although I have not been a member of the committee since the start of the evidence-taking stage of the bill, I would nonetheless like to take this opportunity to thank all those who have taken the time to contribute and who have given evidence to the committee over the past months.

I also thank the committee clerks for bringing it all together and for the support that they have shown me since I came into post. I also thank committee members, who have worked together to agree the general principles of the bill and to reach what I thought was unanimous agreement on the stage 1 report. It was disappointing to hear what Pam Duncan-Glancy said today, because we, as a committee, went through and agreed 400-odd paragraphs line by line.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: The member knows that I raised significant concerns during the discussion on the report and, indeed, throughout the evidence taking in committee, and that I made it very clear that the Government would have to make changes to the bill to get our support. That is consistent with my approach today.

Jackie Dunbar: Yes—I do not deny that. I am saying that we unanimously agreed the stage 1 report line by line, but it now sounds as though the Labour Party wants to get rid of the SQA. If Labour members abstain, logic suggests that they disagree with having a new qualifications body. I am a little bit confused about that.

Sue Webber: You rightly point out that the stage 1 report is critical of the bill and recommends a suite of changes and amendments that are coming. Like you, I am a bit concerned about where the new-found division has come from.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Members should always speak through the chair.

Jackie Dunbar: Of course, it would be remiss of me if I did not pay tribute to Sue Webber and Evelyn Tweed, the former convener and deputy convener of the committee. They started the work and built the foundations for the stage 1 report. I thank them both.

The Education (Scotland) Bill is part of the Scottish Government's programme for government, part of our vision to improve the lives of young folk and children, and part of achieving the First Minister's ultimate goal of eradicating child poverty in Scotland. Education is very important to the lives of our children and young people and the opportunities that lie ahead for them. What bairns learn at a young age can allow them to unlock their full potential and open the door to all sorts of opportunities. In short, if we give our bairns the best possible start, it can benefit them throughout their lives.

That principle underpins many of the Scottish Government's policies, starting at birth. When a child is born, every family in Scotland receives a baby box and many are supported by best start grants. Throughout their childhood, support is available through the game-changing Scottish child payment, and free education has been extended from nursery right through university. Soon, if the budget passes, the Scottish Government will right a wrong by making every child in Scotland equal. Children who happen to have two or more siblings will no longer be disadvantaged by the UK Government's two-child cap. That will right the wrong of the current Labour UK Government, which has continued that horrendous cap.

The bill proposes many positive steps, such as setting out the functions of qualifications Scotland, a new organisation that will have the authority to craft qualifications, whether for itself or others to award, and to devise programmes of learning to match those qualifications. People need to have confidence in our national qualifications and in the body that awards them. That confidence must come from all corners. It must come from our children and young people, who are most affected; from their parents and carers, who will undoubtedly want the best for them; from the teachers, whom we trust with our young people's education and care throughout the school day; and from employers, who will look at those qualifications when they offer jobs in years to come.

That confidence simply does not exist with the SQA as things stand. I hope that, moving forward, we can work to ensure that qualifications Scotland is able to build the level of trust that everyone expects of our national qualifications organisations. With dedicated committees for students and teachers to hold qualifications Scotland accountable, charters to set out what learners and teachers should expect from the body and an enhanced governance model that separates its awarding and accreditation functions to ensure that decisions on those matters are taken independently of one another, qualifications

Scotland will ensure that it operates with integrity, transparency and fairness.

The bill will also create the office of His Majesty's chief inspector of education in Scotland. That person will lead and oversee a new inspectorate to drive forward the high standards that we rightly expect in our schools. There is a clear need for the chief inspector to operate independently, including independently of ministers, when they set out—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Ms Dunbar, please bring your remarks to a close.

Jackie Dunbar: —their inspection methodologies and inspection judgments. Scrutiny is proposed to come through regular—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Ms Dunbar, you will need to conclude. You are over your time.

Jackie Dunbar: I will conclude there—thank you.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Ms Dunbar. I reiterate to members that there is no time in hand.

15:45

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): As the former convener of the Education, Children and Young People Committee, I am delighted to speak in today's debate. I thank everyone for their kind words on my convenership; it was a role that I loved, and I know that I have passed it on to the very safe hands of my colleague Douglas Ross.

For years, now, the Scottish Government has been promising to reform Scottish education. We heard about the timeline from Ross Greer, who, despite his age, has been in the Parliament for a little bit longer than I have. Although the main catalyst for some of the change was the utterly disastrous handling of exams during the pandemic, the concerns had been bubbling away for a long time. Scotland's declining performance predates Covid, so we cannot use that as an excuse.

Under the Scottish National Party, education in Scotland has fallen in international rankings, and Scotland's mean programme for international student assessment scores in maths and science are at a record low. The SNP has also failed—and is failing—to close the attainment gap, with the gap between the poorest and richest primary pupils in reading, writing, literacy and numeracy remaining similar to before the pandemic.

The Education (Scotland) Bill aims to replace the SQA with a new body, qualifications Scotland, which will take on functions related to developing and awarding qualifications, accrediting other

qualifications, and providing advice to ministers on those matters.

The bill will also establish the office of His Majesty's chief inspector of education as a new independent body for education inspections. The inspectorate will be responsible for school and early learning inspections and for evaluating broader educational services.

The Education, Children and Young People Committee's stage 1 report makes it clear that there must be a major change in the education system. However, it also makes it clear that the SNP's current plans to replace the SQA will deliver no real change at all. The report states that the SQA's reputation "has become tarnished" and that legislation alone cannot change culture. After all, much of culture change is down to leadership, changes to ways of working and a commitment to doing things very differently.

I will focus on two areas: the change from the SQA to the new qualifications Scotland body and the independence of the new inspectorate. We have heard much about those two things already.

The first issue, which I have already touched on, is the culture change that is needed. That must happen, and it will be driven by leadership, with leaders being willing to accept that they have made mistakes. Leaders must listen to concerns and make the necessary changes from the top down. I am concerned that that is not happening right now.

The EIS, the nation's largest teaching union, has also criticised the bill. The organisation highlighted concerns about the lack of separation between the new qualifications body's accreditation, regulating and awarding functions.

The Association of Directors of Education in Scotland said:

"There is a danger that change will be minimal and that the existing elements of the system are being repackaged and reinstated in a different order. This does not meet what is required or recommended by Muir, Hayward and OECD ... A change of name and structure is not a sufficient response to Muir and OECD recommendations ... There is a disproportionate focus on structures when cultural and behavioural change in national organisations is also required."

ADES also said that the bill looked "autocratic and top down", and it questioned why the same personnel would be running the new organisations.

School Leaders Scotland said:

"Although the Bill deals with the replacement of the SQA with Qualifications Scotland, there needs to be a complete change of culture in the new body. It cannot be a rebranding ... with the same attitudes, and a lack of transparency and of trust."

The Muir review recommended that the accreditation function be separated from the awarding function under the new arrangements. Professor Muir said that it was inappropriate to have the functions together, because it appeared to some that the SQA was marking its own homework. We have heard much about that concern today.

If the Education (Scotland) Bill is changing the SQA into qualifications Scotland with all the same people in the same place despite their endless failures, how can that be anything but a rebrand? When the cabinet secretary responded to Ms Duncan-Glancy's intervention earlier today, it was encouraging to hear that complete separation might well be on the cards.

The second point that I want to look at is the independence of the new inspector. The report states:

"A key aim of the Bill is to strengthen the independence of the inspectorate."

However, it also states:

"Ministers will retain the ability to direct the Chief Inspector to secure the inspection of specific or types of educational establishments and a power to specify the intervals at which inspections take place."

From the evidence that I heard during my time as convener of the committee, I believe that it is vitally important that the inspector reports to the Parliament, not to the Scottish Government and ministers. The need for the new HM chief inspector to be, and to be seen to be, independent was repeatedly stressed by stakeholders including Dr Judith McClure CBE, who stated:

"It is vital for the future development of Scottish Education that there should be a regular assessment by qualified Inspectors of the performance, achievements and problems in individual schools and other organisations providing education. These assessments will be of use only if the inspectorate is independent and led by a gifted and experienced HM Chief Inspector of Education who is independent in this work and understands what team leadership and planning mean."

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): You need to conclude.

Sue Webber: I will, Presiding Officer.

I hope that the SNP will reflect on the committee's critical conclusions and come back with meaningful plans that will deliver the changes that Scottish education desperately needs.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We do not have any time in hand, so I will cut speakers off at six minutes, if not slightly before that. Evelyn Tweed will be followed by Alex Rowley. You have up to six minutes, Ms Tweed.

15:51

Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP): I thank all the stakeholders who gave their time and energy to the bill. In Scotland, we have great schools and great teachers. It is clear from the evidence that we heard that change is required, and this is a timely opportunity to build on the strengths of our education system.

Ultimately, the bill must serve stakeholders across the education sector, especially learners, parents, carers and teachers. The committee believes that it is vital that there is diverse representation across all the engagement, governance and inspection mechanisms that are set out in the bill.

The bill refers to the need to have regard to the needs and interests of those in Gaelic-medium education or Gaelic-learner education, which is welcome. We had evidence in a joint submission from a number of organisations seeking similar provision for British Sign Language. They point out that BSL and Gaelic have similar legal and demographic status. Both languages allow the children and young people who use them access to a rich culture, heritage and identity. Having access to information and exam materials in their preferred languages is a right that must be promoted and protected for deaf learners. The committee agreed and made a recommendation that BSL should have parity with Gaelic in the bill.

I am pleased that the Government has acknowledged the importance of that. It highlighted in its response to the committee the current provisions for both new bodies that require them to have regard to the importance of communicating in the way that best meets the needs of children and young people, including those with additional support needs. The Government is also considering how the new bodies can better take account of the wish to use BSL. I look forward to the conclusions on how best to achieve that and whether the existing measures in the bill should be strengthened to that effect.

It is vital that national agencies meet the needs of everyone. We heard in evidence that, without good data, it is difficult to understand whether decisions or policies have disproportionate impacts on particular groups. The committee has requested that the Government set out how it plans to improve data collection ahead of stage 2. I am glad that the Government has agreed with us that that data is important. It set out in its response to us its view that user-focused structures, both within the governance of qualifications Scotland and as part of the chief inspector's advisory council, will be important to gathering and considering evidence. I look forward to hearing more detail on how that process will work and how intersectional data will inform those bodies.

The need for a culture change was brought up again and again in evidence, and it is clear that the Government understands that such a change is necessary. The policy memorandum stated that the bill is

“an opportunity to reset the culture and engagement arrangements”.

The bill's aim is to ensure that the governance structures of the national qualifications body reflect, represent and are accountable to stakeholders and service users. That is a positive aim. However, throughout the evidence, we heard fears that the bill would amount to little more than a rebrand without concerted effort to foment a culture change.

In our report, the committee acknowledged that legislation alone “cannot change culture”. As we have heard, much of culture change is down to leadership, changed ways of working and a commitment to doing things differently. The Government has acknowledged that and set out that

“embedding learner and teacher voices”—[*Official Report, Education, Children and Young People Committee*, 9 October 2024; c 8.]

in the process will help to drive change, and that is very welcome.

The bill is a single component of wider reform. It is the scaffolding on which non-legislative reforms are being built. As those reforms emerge in more detail, I hope that stakeholders will feel confident in them. I know that the Government is committed to ensuring that the bill is accompanied by real culture change, and I am interested to hear more detail as the bill progresses regarding how culture change will be encouraged, what success will look like, how progress will be measured and whether there are other examples of similar efforts to shift culture in national agencies that we can learn from.

I welcome the general principles of the bill. I am disappointed that Labour no longer supports it. It is vital that representation and culture change are at the fore as the new bodies are built. I look forward to seeing how stage 2 will further strengthen the measures that are set out in the bill.

15:57

Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I thank the Education, Children and Young People Committee for the work that it has done so far on the Education (Scotland) Bill and the comprehensive stage 1 report that we are debating today.

As I read the report, I got a sense of the frustration that is felt by many about the fact that although there is a desperate need for change, the

bill, as it is currently framed, will not deliver the change that is required.

Among the bill's critics are the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland, Professor Donaldson, Colleges Scotland, School Leaders Scotland, ADES, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and the Royal Society of Edinburgh, as well as trade unions including the EIS, the NASUWT and Unite.

However, despite the criticism, it is the view of most stakeholders, including the teaching unions, that the bill needs to be passed to ensure that the SQA is abolished, and that it should be amended at later stages to ensure that it has real consequences. Therefore, Labour will not vote against the bill at stage 1, but we are clear that a lot of changes will need to be made for the bill to gain support as it progresses.

It is worth putting on record the EIS's view that the SQA is a body whose reputation has been irreparably damaged, as a result of its having become distant from and unresponsive to the professional viewpoints of teachers and lecturers. Many will ask whether the bill addresses such concerns, which, as I know from speaking to hundreds of teachers over the past few years, are widely shared. The OECD has acknowledged the existence of those concerns. It said:

“consideration should be given to a separate body that might be responsible for the regulation and quality of qualifications which is currently part of the remit of the Scottish Qualifications Authority.”

Despite that, in its evidence, the SQA confirmed that the bill

“creates a new organisation that has the same functions, not just in broad terms but in quite specific terms, as the existing organisation.”—[*Official Report, Education, Children and Young People Committee*, 25 September 2024; c 6.]

I note that, in its recommendations, the committee states that it shares the

“concerns that, at present, there is insufficient separation of, and distinction between, the awarding and accreditation functions.”

Its report goes on to state:

“The committee believes that the accreditation function should sit separately from Qualifications Scotland ... the Committee asks the Scottish Government to explore more fully the options of where else the accreditation function could sit, including within the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework Partnership.”

I hope that the Government is listening and that it will work with parties across the chamber to address the glaring weaknesses in the bill.

The committee makes this point in the report's conclusion:

“Although the committee supports the replacement of the SQA and the creation of an independent inspectorate, it does not yet have sufficient information on the wider educational reform. Whilst the Committee agrees the general principles, it believes the Bill will require substantial amendment to ensure that the improvements envisaged by the Scottish Government in relation to engagement, governance, organisational culture and accountability, become a reality for learners, teachers and staff. As such, the Cabinet Secretary must take cognisance of the points raised in this report on these issues and respond to these”

with amendments, working with other parties in the chamber,

“ahead of stage 2.”

I have also picked up that there is a sense of disappointment among many involved in education and skills that the bill is fairly limited—they believe that much wider educational reform in Scotland is greatly required.

The committee report acknowledges that when it states:

“Respondents to the committee’s calls for views repeatedly expressed disappointment that the bill focuses on structures, rather than policy change, and that the bill does not offer a more comprehensive package of reform.”

Some, including the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, YouthLink Scotland, the Scottish Youth Parliament and the SQA, argued that the reforms in the bill must be part of a bigger package, with the SQA stating that

“the bill should be a catalyst for more far-reaching and fundamental reform. Change should not start and stop with the provisions in the bill, and, if it were to do so, a major opportunity would be lost.” —[*Official Report, Education, Children and Young People Committee*, 25 September 2024; c 3.]

The committee picked up on that point when it stated that it

“acknowledges the frustration of those who wanted the Bill to include measures for wider reform, particularly in relation to assessments and qualifications.”

I look forward to the Government’s response to the report, and I sincerely hope that it will work with all parties across the chamber as the bill progresses.

16:02

Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): I thank everyone in the Education, Children and Young People Committee and especially our excellent clerking team, as well as the many organisations and individuals who have contributed to the legislation so far. I and my colleagues look forward to working with them further at stage 2.

I believe that the Government is serious in its desire to improve outcomes for our learners and support those who deliver further positive outcomes in classrooms and education settings across Scotland. I am grateful for the broad

support that the general principles of the bill have received at stage 1.

We need to keep in mind that the bill represents only a part, albeit a significant one, of the desire that we all share for education reform. It is intended to build on the findings of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and the comprehensive review that was led by Professor Ken Muir. I believe that the bill will provide the necessary structure to support broader reforms across our education system and I look forward to hearing the Government’s plans in that regard.

Centrally, the bill is about creating an education system that will deliver for and better serve our children and young people and those who deliver that education. The establishment of qualifications Scotland and the enhanced independence of His Majesty’s chief inspector of education in Scotland reflect a welcome shift towards improving outcomes and rebuilding trust. For too long, national education bodies have been seen as too distant and too remote from the front line. The bill is here to bridge that gap.

The aim of the governance processes that will be embedded within qualifications Scotland is to ensure that the expertise and experience of pupils and teachers are at the heart of decision making. They will achieve that by requiring that practising teachers from schools and colleges and individuals with knowledge of learners’ interests serve on its board. The creation of learner and teacher charters, which will be developed collaboratively with their users, will bring a welcome clarity to the expectations that are placed on qualifications Scotland. The statutory establishment of the learner interest committee and the teacher and practitioner interest committee will further those aims in order to achieve what I hope will be not only a structural change but a cultural one as well.

I appreciate that some would like further steps to be taken to ensure that such cultural change is firmly embedded in the bill. I thank the office of the Children and Young People’s Commissioner Scotland for its briefing ahead of today’s debate. Its submission highlights the importance of ensuring that children participate in decision making. I fundamentally agree that children need to be at the heart of the changes if we are to be successful in the broader aim of effecting, as I said, not only a structural change but also a cultural change. I am happy to explore ways of achieving that with the commissioner.

We must also recognise that legislation alone cannot achieve the level of practice and cultural transformation that is required. I note that the Scottish Government is progressing a range of complementary reforms such as the establishment

of the new centre for teaching excellence and the on-going refocusing of Education Scotland in order for it to lead on curriculum design, delivery and improvement. Those initiatives, alongside the provisions in the bill, aim to ensure that our national education bodies are not only high performing but accessible and trusted by the teachers, children and young people that they serve. I look forward to watching and scrutinising the development of those proposals.

We must also take a moment to recognise that Scotland's education system has much to be proud of. Our schools and teachers deliver extraordinary achievements every day, and we should be careful about being perceived in any way as undermining those successes. However, we must also be open about the challenges that we face. I believe that the bill is a critical step in strengthening our education system to meet those challenges head on and ensure that every child and young person has the opportunity to fulfil their potential. The changes that are outlined in the bill and the broader reform programme are not about discarding the strengths of the existing system but about building on them.

I urge all members to support the principles of the Education (Scotland) Bill at stage 1, because we all need to work together to shape an education system that is not only fit for today but ready to meet the needs of tomorrow.

16:07

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): It is nothing personal against the ministers on the Government's front bench, who, individually, I quite like, but I am afraid that I cannot bring myself to trust the SNP with Scotland's education, let alone with reforming it, because, for as long as vested interests have an automatic veto over change in Scottish education, as they do now, we will be stuck with the same problems.

The SNP Government cannot and will not take on the establishment conventional wisdom. It cannot or will not stand up for the best interests of teachers or parents or young people. It is afraid to upset the liberal consensus in our education system. It will not go near the presumption of mainstreaming for children with additional support needs, who are often horribly failed. It will not go near dealing with the breakdown of discipline in our schools, which has seen a horrific rise in the number of violent incidents occurring in schools—there were 45,000 last year alone. Last week, the cabinet secretary backed off on teacher numbers and permanent contracts, claiming that a deal was in place with COSLA, only for it to unravel within hours. The SNP's education reform agenda is a dishonest chimera.

Let us start with qualifications Scotland. In the words of the SQA, the bill

"creates a new organisation that has the same functions, not just in broad terms but in quite specific terms, as the existing organisation."—[*Official Report, Education, Children and Young People Committee*, 25 September 2024; c 6.]

It is a name change and nothing more.

At the core of the SNP's Muir review was the sensible proposal that there should be a separation between the SQA's accreditation and awarding functions. Professor Muir, whom I have always found to be eminently reasonable, argued on the basis of experience and evidence that, without that separation of functions, the SQA was in effect "marking its own homework". However, the cabinet secretary and the bright sparks in her team have decided to set those findings aside. I am afraid to say that that is yet another example of the actions of a clapped-out Government with no appetite to reform the education system because it is in thrall to too many vested interests.

Martin Whitfield: I struggle to find evidence that the Government understands why the separation is so important. Does the member also struggle to find that?

Stephen Kerr: I do. All the evidence that has been presented suggests a clear case. However, the Government is in thrall to vested interests.

In its 2021 report, the OECD described a "cluttered" landscape in which different groups were competing for attention and space. However, we have seen the cabinet secretary, like her predecessors, not daring to take on those interest groups. Do members remember John Swinney's flagship education reform bill? It fell at exactly the same hurdle.

I support the conclusions of the Education, Children and Young People Committee's stage 1 report, which states:

"the accreditation function should sit separately from Qualifications Scotland."

If, as the committee notes, the bill is intended to attract the

"confidence that is expected or hoped for"

in a national qualifications body, it is clearly failing in that objective.

Elsewhere in its report, the committee states that culture change is not a product of legislation, as has been mentioned already in the debate. I completely agree. Culture change is a product of leadership, and I am pessimistic about culture change in a renamed, failing SQA that is run by the same people who have been unable to deliver it previously.

I will say something about the proposal to establish an independent office of His Majesty's chief inspector of education in Scotland. The Scottish Conservatives have long argued for that, and we have not been alone in repeatedly pointing out how inadequate the inspection regime is. The inspectorate should report to the Parliament, as Audit Scotland does. The critical appointment that will determine the success or otherwise of the significant change, which I welcome, will be that of the chief inspector. I return to the point that I made a few moments ago about the importance of having the right organisational culture. That will be down to the leadership of the chief inspector. The bill is opaque when it comes to describing the purpose of inspections, which is unhelpful. The committee makes that point in its report. The level of resource that is to be made available to the new inspectorate and the scope of its functional operations are also unclear. That is not satisfactory even at stage 1.

I turn to Education Scotland. As the NASUWT made clear to the committee, Education Scotland has lost the trust and confidence of teachers. The bill does not change that—it does not come anywhere near it. Professor Mark Priestley of the University of Stirling told the committee:

“Currently, we have a lot of issues with agencies that have overlapping functions and a lack of clarity about function. There are demarcation issues and boundary issues. There are agencies that do operational and strategic stuff and that also evaluate their own work, so there are conflicts of interests.

The system is set up to justify itself and to celebrate its success, rather than take a critical look at what happens, and that is seen very clearly by practitioners working on the ground.”—[*Official Report, Education, Children and Young People Committee*, 18 September 2024; c30.]

Professor Priestley hit the bull's-eye. I back the committee's request that the Scottish Government sets out its full intentions for Education Scotland. The cabinet secretary may recall that, in previous private conversations with her, I have made it very clear that, if we cannot find the purpose of Education Scotland or the value that it adds, we ought to do away with it.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You must conclude, Mr Kerr.

Stephen Kerr: The bill is clearly inadequate.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you.

Stephen Kerr: My understanding is that we will vote for it—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Foysoil Choudhury.

16:14

Foysoil Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): It has been clear for years that the SQA is not fit for purpose. After repeated mistakes, trust between teaching practitioners and the SQA is at an all-time low. Whether it be the higher history exam controversy or the injustice of the 2020 exam results, members recognise that changes are needed.

With the bill, the Scottish Government had the opportunity to turn the page and build a new body that works in partnership to deliver for learners and teachers. Unfortunately, it does not achieve that and falls short of what is necessary. In his evidence to the education committee, Professor Kenneth Muir said:

“We need a system that builds greater trust and ... increases empowerment”.—[*Official Report, Education, Children and Young People Committee*, 18 September 2024; c 3.]

Rebuilding trust is a fundamental part of why the bill is necessary. I will discuss whether it falls short in rebuilding trust and increasing accountability, specifically regarding qualifications Scotland.

I would like to note, as other members have, the proposed accreditation power for qualifications Scotland. In his report on replacing the SQA, Professor Muir said that he was encouraged by the ministers to be bold and to leave no options off the table. However, the Scottish Government—after previously accepting the recommendation on splitting responsibilities—is no longer interested in being bold. Now, qualifications Scotland will retain both awarding and accrediting powers.

Recently, the issue with the higher history paper was compounded by the perception of the SQA marking its own work. That perception, regardless of any new name, will remain for qualifications Scotland if it continues to be both an awarding and an accrediting body, and that will not improve confidence.

The Education, Children and Young People Committee was told of the perception of decisions being made for teaching professionals rather than being made by them. If qualifications Scotland is to avoid the issue that has been faced by the SQA, it must be truly representative of, and engage with, educators. Although teachers will be included on the board, the extent of their representation, other than in terms of numbers, is not clear, and the lack of trade union membership is not acceptable.

A lack of clarity regarding representation is seen in other areas. In the interest committees, there is nothing to account for the wide range of experiences in learning and teaching. The large presence of qualifications Scotland staff on the interest committees contradicts their purpose

entirely. The committees' function, other than to advise qualifications Scotland, is also not clear. If the committees are to be a "meaningful mechanism", as the policy memorandum states, they cannot just be talking shops.

In the provision regarding the strategic advisory council, there is, again, no specification on its membership or on how the council will interact with the interest committees, which, following recent controversies, should be key. We must see further detail on how all those bodies will ensure representation and responsibility; otherwise, the issues that plagued the SQA will be repeated.

I will finish by discussing equalities. Of the parts of qualifications Scotland that I have mentioned, all must endeavour to include the voices of ethnic minorities and anyone who experiences prejudice in education. Scotland is committed to building an anti-racist education system. Those principles should be baked into the foundations of qualifications Scotland. I understand that the education committee has asked the Scottish Government to set out how it will improve data collection processes for protected groups. I join the committee in requesting that. Any new body must have the best information possible to understand how its decisions are affecting learners, especially vulnerable people.

The SQA's replacement must be accountable and representative and must engage with teachers, learners and parents. This reform will affect the prospects of future generations, and we cannot afford to repeat the mistakes that were made with the SQA, so the bill must deliver.

16:20

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in today's debate.

I joined the Education, Children and Young People Committee just before the stage 1 inquiry started, so I have been through all that, but I was not so closely involved when problems with the SQA were surfacing.

As a relative newcomer, it strikes me that there was a rush to commit to new legislation and restructuring, whereas, on reflection, the main problems seem to have been about culture and how things were done rather than about the structures.

Therefore, I am relaxed about the fact that the bill does not go further with reforms than it does. Issues such as independence and separation might or might not be resolved by having people in separate legal entities. Even when there are separate legal entities, there can be a lack of independence, whereas there can be effective

independence even when people are in the same organisation. The Finance and Public Administration Committee looked at some of that in relation to the question whether commissioners are truly independent.

Therefore, for me, the important thing is to get the right people with the right attitudes in the new and continuing roles that are envisaged.

Stephen Kerr: Will John Mason take an intervention?

John Mason: I will take a brief intervention.

Stephen Kerr: The problem with the thesis that John Mason suggests is that, if an organisation is built around the leadership of one person, what happens when that person goes? How can we create a sustainable organisational culture if it is all about the one person who is in charge?

John Mason: It should not be about one person. Any organisation should have independent people who challenge the leadership, as I have tried to show in my past life.

Specifically, the question of independence was considered in relation to the new chief inspector of education, although I do not quite understand why it has to be His Majesty's chief inspector.

There was a general welcome for the new structure, although the suggestion of more accountability to the Parliament did come up. Again, the finance committee had previously looked at that topic and found that several commissioners, who were theoretically accountable to the Parliament, seldom appeared before committees because the relevant committee already had too much on its plate. Therefore, the Parliament and committees need to be careful about what they wish for.

There are many positives in our schools and in the school education system more generally. Clearly, it suits some politicians to emphasise how awful things are, but, from my visits to schools and my interaction with young people, I think that we are producing much more rounded individuals than we did when I was at school.

Curriculum for excellence talks about the four capacities that we want for our children and young people: that they become successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors. Although the bill, rightly, focuses on the first of those capacities—successful learners—I hope that we will not lose sight of the other three: confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors. Those capacities might be harder to measure, but I believe that they are incredibly important. We want to improve things across the board, and that is good. However, despite my being an

accountant, I know that some very valuable things are difficult if not impossible to measure.

I will move on to more specific issues that the committee picked up on. I understand why the word “learner” has been used as an all-encompassing term. I also accept, as the Government points out, that not every sub-group can be named in the bill. However, specifically mentioning children and young people is surely important because they are such a major sub-group.

The Government response to the committee’s report says that it will consider how to give “better visibility” to children and young people. For what it is worth, my suggestion is to expand the phrase to something such as “children, young people and other learners”.

It is certainly a theme of the committee’s report that children, young people, other learners, families, teachers and lecturers must all be involved throughout the education system. I fully endorse that, but we must also ensure that boards and advisory councils, while being representative, do not become too large and unwieldy. A wide range of voices needs to be heard, but not every voice needs a place at every table.

Some of the trade unions, such as the EIS, were keen to have greater representation, if not an actual majority, on the board of qualifications Scotland and elsewhere. I do not think that any group should have a majority—many interest groups should be involved. However, I take the point that one or more teachers’ representatives should be answerable and accountable to teachers as a whole. Therefore, it would be helpful if the Government could take account of that, even if it does not want a union representative as such.

I also very much agree with the point that carers and parents need to be involved in qualifications Scotland. Very often, the interests of teachers, young people and parents are very similar, if not identical. However, there will be times when those three groups have interests that are slightly different, such as at the time of school closures during Covid.

Scotland is a small country, and we should be able to do things in a simpler way with fewer public bodies. As the committee report says in paragraph 416,

“the education landscape in Scotland”

is complex, and we do not want

“duplication and confusion”.

I note the Government’s response and the emphasis on partnership working, although it worries me a bit that that just means even more meetings. I very much hope that Ivan McKee’s

work on public sector reform will reduce the number of bodies in education and elsewhere.

The committee expects a range of amendments to be lodged at stage 2 by the Government and MSPs more widely. However, right now, I agree with the committee’s final conclusion that we should agree to the general principles of the bill.

16:26

Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): I am pleased to take part in today’s debate. As Parliament was made aware yesterday, George Adam, who is an SNP member of the committee, is unfortunately unwell this week, and we wish him a speedy recovery. His not being able to take part in the debate has given others in the group an opportunity to speak. As someone who sat on the Education, Children and Young People Committee for a year, I want to add a few thoughts to today’s debate.

First, I will talk about the time that we are taking over educational reform and the fact that this bill is a part of the progress that will be made over the coming years. As is the case for the committee that I am now on—the Criminal Justice Committee—the legislation that colleagues are examining and that the cabinet secretary is taking forward is some of the most important that we will consider collectively before the election. It is absolutely right that we take the necessary time to undertake that work appropriately, thoroughly and correctly.

This is anecdotal, but, back in August 2010, when I was working in a school office, there was a lot of discussion there and more widely in the teaching profession about the fact that Opposition parties, unions and people in the teaching profession had concerns about curriculum for excellence being brought in too quickly. On the one hand, historically, people have talked about things being brought in too quickly, but, on the other hand, today, I have heard criticism from around the chamber that the Government is taking too long. I think that the Government is correct to take the appropriate length of time to get things right, and I fully back the cabinet secretary in doing that.

There has been discussion around the chamber about the importance of cultural change and about whether creating qualifications Scotland will have that effect. There has also been discussion around schedule 3, which, quite rightly, will transfer people under employment law to the new body. I was involved in the passage of the Social Security (Scotland) Act 2018 and was the minister responsible for Social Security Scotland. There was a lot of criticism during that period about whether Social Security Scotland would be able to

embrace a new culture, and some people wanted to exclude previous employees of the Department for Work and Pensions from working for Social Security Scotland. Rightly, those calls were rejected for a range of reasons. Today, many people who used to work for the DWP are doing an excellent job for Social Security Scotland and are delivering a very different service, particularly with regard to child disability payment and adult disability payment. There is a very different culture in that organisation.

Stephen Kerr: The point is not about the employees but about leadership. Lots of really good people work in these organisations—in fact, many of them gave anonymous evidence to the committee, which I read in the report, as can Ben Macpherson. It is not about that; it is about getting the change of leadership that we need.

Ben Macpherson: I am not going to speak about individual people at the top of organisations or about groups of people. I made that point to draw a distinction.

I appreciate the points in the committee's report and those that have been made in the chamber today about leadership, but we also want to utilise the expertise and experience in Scotland that is appropriate in that regard. I am sure that the right balance will be found, and I trust my colleagues on the committee to probe that through the various stages to come.

My next point is that the bill, if passed, will be the first step in the education reform journey and in delivering the vision that Professor Muir put forward and taking forward the OECD's proposals and the Hayward review, as the cabinet secretary set out in a recent statement.

As well as the bill being the first step, it is important to remember that we are building the foundations for a system that will need to be agile—and probably more so than any previous education system in Scotland—in the 21st century. I sometimes worry that, collectively, when it comes to education, we have a 20th century mindset, when we really need to be in a Hayward-plus 21st century or perhaps 22nd century mindset, because of the rapid change that will take place in the global economy due to technology in the period ahead. That is some food for thought.

Lastly, I will raise a point that we discussed briefly at the committee when I was on it. Although I appreciate the points that have been made about the perception of SQA domestically, we should note that it has a very trusted and respected brand abroad. We will want to preserve that, both for the reputation of Scotland's education internationally and for the revenue that it will bring in.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to closing speeches.

16:32

Ross Greer: I will pick up where I finished my opening speech: on the need for good culture and practice, particularly in how qualifications Scotland will engage with young people. That is not the experience that young people have had with the SQA—and that even applies to those who have been involved nationally in its structures.

We have heard previously from members of the Scottish Youth Parliament who sat on the national qualifications group and on the Covid-19 education recovery group. They mentioned, for example, receiving papers for meetings that were hundreds of pages long the night before or even the morning of a meeting. That is not accessible for adult professionals, never mind young volunteers whom we expect to be able to contribute. In addition, those who have been involved in the SQA's learner panel have regularly talked about the feedback that is given simply being ignored and never making it beyond SQA senior management. One amendment that I intend to introduce is to make the new learner interest committee and the teacher and practitioner interest committee directly accountable to the board, not to the senior management of qualifications Scotland.

Members have made a number of comments about the SQA board. I have been critical for years of the balance of the SQA's current board. It is wrong that, for years, the board has had more management consultants on it than teachers. There is a space for management consultants—good corporate governance is important. However, that is not the right balance for our national exams body.

The bill starts to rebalance the board, but my preference would be to go a bit further. John Mason made a very important point about the wording in the bill referring to a space on the board for those with "knowledge of" those undertaking qualifications. That, to me, reads as an adult who will speak on behalf of young people rather than a young person.

There is space on the board for an adult who is, for example, an expert in the rights of children and young people, but that is not the same as having a young person on the board. It is also important to consider the distinction between children and young people and adult learners when we talk about learners. However, as John Mason said, children, young people and school-age students are of such importance here that there needs to be space for them.

My preference for the board is more similar to the General Teaching Council for Scotland model. A majority of board members should be registered teachers or lecturers. Within that, there should be

spaces for those who are current classroom teachers. There is a value in having retired teachers, headteachers and members of senior management involved with their contributions, but it is particularly important to have current classroom teachers involved in the governance. We need to strengthen the provision that someone represents the interests of staff to ensure that that individual is chosen and elected by staff, with the obvious method being through their recognised unions.

The two advisory committees need to be further strengthened, as the convener mentioned in his remarks. I would also ask why there is provision for staff of the organisation to be on those committees at all. Parliamentary clerks and advisers to our committees do not sit on the committees—they support them. Council officers do not sit on council committees. I suggest that we amend that provision to specify that members of the advisory committee to qualifications Scotland cannot be members of staff at qualifications Scotland. Even a minority can dominate, especially in a situation where the minority are adult professionals in a body that has set up a space that is designed for children and young people.

That goes to the important point that Willie Rennie made about making sure that we hear from the boy at the back of the class who would never otherwise engage and who is never going to be on the learner advisory committee. That is why I mentioned earlier that I will lodge an amendment to require that the organisation consult much more widely, and not just with the relatively self-selecting groups that will be involved at a national level.

Jackie Dunbar: How can we get the children who are not engaged to engage with us? I know that that is a very difficult question—and I am asking it through the chair, Presiding Officer.

Ross Greer: I would love to have another six minutes to talk about that.

As a former member of the Scottish Youth Parliament, I have raised one specific thing, which I mentioned in my opening contribution. As it stands, the SQA has no ability to simply send a direct email to every young person who is undertaking an SQA qualification. That is a basic operational issue. There should be the ability for qualifications Scotland to do that, so that it can pose simple questions and send out basic surveys and get a much wider response. Further effort would be required for those who are most disengaged, but, as it stands, we cannot even email every young person who just took the higher history exam to tell them what is going on. That is an operational issue that needs to be resolved.

The advisory council of the inspectorate also needs to be strengthened. As much as this provision needs amending, in the bill the advisory board for qualifications Scotland has a space on it for someone representing the interests of the board's staff, and the advisory council of the inspectorate needs something similar. The staff of the inspectorate have a huge depth of knowledge, and that should be represented on the advisory board.

Willie Rennie posed an interesting question about why ministers should have the power to direct the inspectorate. I think that they should. For example, ministers should be able to direct the inspectorate to do thematic inspections to ensure that policy decisions are delivered, such as that our schools are LGBTQ inclusive, and to see how schools are dealing with issues such as the endemic problem of violence against women and girls. There is a way to balance that with independence and with the balance between Government and Parliament as well; for example, we could require the chief inspector to consult Parliament before planning inspections.

I am aware of the time, Presiding Officer. I say in closing that this is a good bill. It could be much better, but it is a good bill and it is one that the Greens will be more than content to support. I am grateful to the cabinet secretary for her engagement and her openness to proposals to change it at stage 2. There are so many positives in that, and I look forward to making those improvements. This is a huge opportunity that we simply cannot afford to miss. We must support the bill.

16:38

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): This has been a fascinating discussion at stage 1 of the bill, when it is for Parliament to decide whether, on the advice of the committee, we support the principles of the bill.

I will pick up on points that were made about the SQA in the previous speech, by Ross Greer, as well as in his opening speech, and in Willie Rennie's speech. Before I do that, I give members the opportunity, should anyone wish it, to intervene to say whether the Scottish Government's response to the committee's report—what we have heard from the cabinet secretary today—gives them confidence that the Government is in a position to make changes to the bill as far as they are probably needed, according to a number of the submissions made in the debate.

Douglas Ross: I am grateful to Martin Whitfield for posing the question in that way. The answer, for me, is probably not. However, all that we are

being asked to do today is to agree the general principles of the bill at stage 1. I and other members might disagree significantly with amendments that the Scottish Government lodges at stage 2, but we are not at that stage yet. Those amendments will come through the cabinet secretary's letter; there will be subsequent amendments at that point.

Martin Whitfield: I am grateful to the member for clarifying his position. The difference in my position and that of Scottish Labour is that we think that, with regard to the principles, we need to look at the bill that is presented to us and, possibly more importantly, at the policy memorandum, where the Scottish Government has articulated those principles. I will pick just one, which states that the bill will lay

“the legal foundations that will enable the body”—

the one that follows the SQA—

“to deliver two distinct and separate functions to achieve these overarching objectives”,

which are

“To develop and award qualifications”

and

“To accredit qualifications.”

The principle that underpins the bill is a single organisation, and I am greatly concerned about that. Significant numbers of members across the chamber are particularly concerned about it. To pick up on Alex Rowley's very positive contribution, we are not going to vote against the bill; we are going to abstain. [*Interruption.*]

I hear humour ringing out across the chamber. Where in the principles is the Scottish Government's confirmation that it will separate those functions? That does not exist in the published bill or in the published papers. It exists only in the contribution that has been made today. That in itself shows the challenge that the Scottish Government has in articulating what its proposed legislation means between stage 1 and stage 2 and, in some cases, stage 3. We are taking the option and opportunity to abstain, which is an indication from those of us on this side of the chamber—with the exception of Willie Rennie—that substantial changes need to be made.

In the short time that I have, I will address the point that John Mason raised—I am glad that he did—about the use of the word “learner” and the significance of not articulating that it means children and young people, who are a significant group that fall under the bill. The Scottish Government needs to look seriously at John Mason's proposal about adding to the description of learner by stating “children, young people and other learners”, which would take account of adult

learners. Bill Kidd mentioned that issue in his thoughtful contribution.

The reason why a reference to children needs to appear in the bill is because of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and human rights. Learners are not rights holders under human rights; children and young people are rights holders. If they are not specifically identified in the bill, they could be seriously challenged should they wish to say that the subsequent legislation has failed them and that their human rights have been breached.

We are duty bearers in respect of the issue, which is why raising it is so important. This also relates to the significant number of comments from members on the lack of consultation and the lack of a role for children and young people in participating in decisions that will affect them specifically. We heard from Ross Greer about the obvious issue that the SQA cannot even write to children but, more importantly, children cannot write to the SQA and expect an answer. The Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland has pointed out that the

“distance between the SQA and children and young people has been a recurring theme”

that is raised by them. The commissioner went on to say that children and young people feel like

“there is ... no way that they can feed back to the SQA. They are keen to do it—they want to say what their experiences are, some of which are not great.”—[*Official Report, Education, Children and Young People Committee, 2 October 2024; c 6.*]

On a number of occasions post the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Incorporation) (Scotland) Act 2024, proposed legislation has come to the chamber that has lacked the language of the UNCRC and has not taken into account, in explicit terms, all that was talked about on that act or the reasons why we fought to get it on to the statute book, which was so important. The bill is another example of that. The UNCRC is talked about and we nod towards it but, when we ask where we can point to that in black and white in the bill or the supporting documents, we find that there is a lack of support for children and young people.

Members are aware of how Scottish Labour intends to vote at decision time tonight. Thank you for your patience, Deputy Presiding Officer.

16:44

Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I am pleased to close the debate on behalf of the Scottish Conservatives. I add to those of others in the chamber my thanks for all the work done by clerks and staff, and by everyone who took part in taking the bill forward at stage 1.

It has already been mentioned that we on the Conservative benches are supportive of the bill in principle. We have been calling for education reform for years, and we are very vocal on the need to move forward with the proposals in the review by Professor Muir. I am glad to see the bill coming forward, but it has to be said that it falls short. There is so much more to do to realise the outcomes of the review.

I cannot put it better than the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland, which stated:

“There is a danger that change will be minimal and that the existing elements of the system are being repackaged and reinstated in a different order. This does not meet what is required or recommended by Muir, Hayward and OECD.”

NASUWT’s submission states:

“NASUWT notes the decision taken within the Bill to ignore Professor Muir’s recommendations that Qualifications Scotland should include the awarding functions of SQA, but not the accreditation function in this area and would reiterate our belief that this is unwise.”

The bill claims to address the deep-rooted issues that are plaguing our education system, but it is not there yet. As the committee’s stage 1 report has shown, the bill falls significantly short of the transformative change that our young people, teachers and educational institutions desperately need. We on these benches will work constructively with the Government on amendments in the run-up to stage 2.

I will mention a couple of contributions, as I always do. I want to add my comments to those of Willie Rennie, Bill Kidd, John Mason, Martin Whitfield and Ross Greer, who said that it is essential that we hear the voice of the child.

It has been mentioned today that there is cross-party support for reform and for the direction of change. I welcome the comments that the cabinet secretary made in her opening remarks on the impetus for reform, which is equally backed across the chamber by Miles Briggs, Ross Greer, Willie Rennie and Bill Kidd, to name but a few.

It is important to reiterate the many comments that His Majesty’s chief inspector of education must not only be independent but be seen to be independent, because perception is paramount. That was mentioned by Miles Briggs, Willie Rennie and Jackie Dunbar, and it was eloquently put across by Sue Webber.

One final point needs to be mentioned. We have heard about the issue of trust, not only when it comes to the SQA but in relation to Education Scotland. Ross Greer commented that the SQA has been having issues since 2017. Sue Webber used the word “tarnished”, which is a very good word, and Stephen Kerr powerfully articulated points made by Professor Priestley. I agree that

Professor Priestley hit the bull’s-eye with his comment that

“The system is set up to justify itself and to celebrate its success, rather than take a critical look at what happens”.—[*Official Report, Education, Children and Young People Committee*, 18 September 2024; c30.]

On a personal note, I will echo Miles Briggs and Evelyn Tweed. As a member of the cross-party group on deafness, I note the committee’s recommendation that the bill be amended to place specific requirements on qualifications Scotland and His Majesty’s chief inspector of education to take account of the needs and interests of those who use BSL or wish to do so. For far too long, we have let down the deaf community. Too many students are left isolated without adequate teaching, and that must stop.

Scotland’s education system once stood as a beacon of excellence, yet under this Government we have seen a steady decline. International rankings tell us a troubling story. Scotland’s PISA scores in maths and science are at record lows. The attainment gap remains almost stagnant, with outcomes for the poorest pupils remaining virtually unchanged. Teachers experience violence in the classroom on a daily basis. ASN pupils are not currently adequately supported. Deaf students are being failed, with a continual reduction in the number of BSL teachers, and care-experienced pupils are still routinely excluded from school.

Scotland’s children should not be subjected to that, and our education system needs a Government that will stand up and make the necessary changes. This bill has the opportunity to be part of that change. At the heart of the bill is the proposed replacement of the SQA with qualifications Scotland, but the committee report has made it clear that that risks being just a rebranding exercise, with minimal structural change or cultural reform. Stakeholders, from teachers to school leavers, have rightly criticised the lack of ambition, and therefore it is imperative that a new body must not inherit the same lack of transparency, trust and accountability that has tarnished the SQA.

I will conclude now. I am sure that you are glad to hear that, Presiding Officer. It is clear that the bill must be substantially improved if it is to deliver for Scotland’s learners, teachers and families. The committee’s report, alongside concerns from education stakeholders, has laid bare the significant shortcomings of the proposals. Scotland’s educational challenges are too great to ignore.

Scotland’s children and young people deserve a bold, visionary approach to education reform. As it stands, the bill does not meet that standard, so amendment at stages 2 and 3 will be needed to

ensure that the vision is realised. As I already said, we will assist with that.

We owe it to the next generation to demand better. We must deliver a system that works for all learners, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Although we agree with the bill's broad principles, substantial changes are required at stage 2. Let this be the moment when we commit to the bold reform that is needed to restore Scotland's world-class education system.

16:50

Jenny Gilruth: I am grateful to members across the chamber who contributed to the debate on the bill in committee and in the chamber this afternoon. I reiterate my thanks to all the stakeholders who have engaged in the process of reform at every stage. I also put on record my thanks to the bright sparks in my team—the hard-working civil servants, who support Governments of all parties and can be found at the back of the chamber. I am sure that Mr Kerr will greet them as he leaves today.

I also put on record my wishes for a happy Christmas not only to members but, in particular, to Scotland's parents, carers, teachers and young people. Christmas is just around the corner. I know that it is the end of the winter term, so I wish them all a happy break when it comes.

One of the key points from the debate bears repeating. The bill is a single but significant component of our continuing programme of education reform. I have set out a range of other actions that we are taking in that regard, but the bill provides the scaffolding around which other, non-legislative changes are being built and are already being taken forward.

I will come to a number of points that members raised, and I hope that I manage to come to most of them.

Key themes emerged from the debate. The first, which was most telling, was trust. Nearly every MSP who spoke mentioned trust in relation to the creation of the new qualifications body. Rebuilding trust between Scotland's teachers and the qualifications body will not be without challenge, but it is inherently important that we get that trust right.

We also have to work with Scotland's young people. There were reflections about some of the challenges that were experienced during the pandemic. I recognise those challenges and the lack of trust that still exists in the system.

What we create next matters. We need to rebuild trust between Scotland's teachers, our young people and the new qualifications body. Jackie Dunbar spoke about the need for

confidence in the new qualifications body, which speaks to the requirement for trust. Sue Webber rightly pointed to the need for cultural change, which will be essential in driving the improvements that we all want to see.

Douglas Ross made a number of important points, many of which I agreed with, which took me somewhat by surprise. Nonetheless, in the space that we are currently working in, it is helpful. There are a number of areas in which I agree with what he said in his role as the education committee convener. He spoke about the learner interest committee and the strategic advisory board. It is important to say that the learner interest committee is a new mechanism to inform qualifications Scotland's decision making. The SQA does not currently have that function.

As, I think, I have said on a number of occasions in the debate, if members want to propose amendments, I will listen to them and meet them. I have already spent some time with Mr Rennie and Mr Greer, and I am going to meet Mr Briggs. I huvnae heard yet from Ms Duncan-Glancy. I know that she is desperate to talk to me, and I am sure that the Scottish Labour Party will be able to bring itself to support the bill at stage 3, because, fundamentally, we all want education reform to be delivered for the benefit of our children and young people.

Mr Ross touched on a number of other areas, but I am cognisant of the time and will not be able to touch on all of them, so I will move on to Mr Greer's contributions. He talked about our time on the Education and Skills Committee in the previous session of Parliament, which I remember well. From his contribution and my reflections, I was struck by the similarities in our findings in the previous session and those that the Education, Children and Young People Committee is dealing with.

I recognise the operational problem that Mr Greer talked about in relation to how the qualifications body engages with the teaching profession, and I would like to take further advice on that matter. There are potential challenges in relation to how we share data with the qualifications body, but those should not be insurmountable. When problems arise—we have had one such problem in very recent history—there should be an opportunity for the qualifications body to communicate directly with the teaching profession. That point was very well made, so I will take it away from the debate.

Miles Briggs talked about the impetus for change, and he spoke about recent history. He also mentioned what happened in 2000 with the exams and qualifications body, when the wrong exam results were issued. I well remember it—I had received my higher results the year before.

That was over 20 years ago. Back then, building back trust was hugely important. Similarly, today, that is exactly where the Government finds itself: rebuilding trust.

Miles Briggs also raised the issue of BSL, which was then raised by Roz McCall in her closing remarks. I want to put on the record—and I have put this in my response to the Education, Children and Young People Committee's stage 1 report—that the Government will lodge amendments to that end. It is hugely important that BSL is recognised, and I provided evidence on that issue to the committee earlier this year.

Miles Briggs talked about delay, but I make no apology for taking a further year to consult Scotland's teaching profession, which I believe is hugely important to the delivery of what comes next.

Miles Briggs: Will the cabinet secretary take an intervention?

Jenny Gilruth: I am happy to do so.

Miles Briggs: One of the key areas that we have touched on in this debate is what the future is for Education Scotland. At the minute, we do not really have a vision. Will the cabinet secretary outline that—if not in the bill, then before the parliamentary session ends?

Jenny Gilruth: I am conscious of the time, so I am more than happy to write to the member about that. I should declare an interest, because I was an employee of Education Scotland some years ago.

The member may be aware of the Government-initiated question that was published earlier this year. It set out a refocused purpose for Education Scotland, which looks at curriculum delivery. My view was that the organisation had become involved in lots of other things, and I wanted it to be very clearly focused on supporting the curriculum and supporting teachers in our schools, which, going back to the ethos behind the establishment of the organisation in 2011, was really what it was meant to be about. I am more than happy to share further details of that with Miles Briggs. I also remind him that, in relation to the further work that Education Scotland will be taking forward, we will be advertising for a chief executive very soon. That will be fundamental to driving some of the cultural change that we need.

Willie Rennie spoke about the strength of the inspectorate. Based on my experience, I have sympathy with the point that the inspectorate should flag concerns and provide evidence, advice and challenge to Government ministers. His party's views on the independence of the chief inspector have been pretty consistent. I recall Tavish Scott having such debates in the previous

parliamentary session, and I am sure that Mr Scott will be delighted to know that the Government now supports his views in that regard.

I am more than happy to have further engagement with Mr Rennie and to listen to his views on the matter. It is imperative to say that it would be extremely rare for the cabinet secretary to instruct an inspection. In my experience, that has happened on only one occasion, so it is very rare.

To that end, I heard some contrary views from Mr Greer in relation to thematic inspections. There have been a number of thematic inspections on maths and numeracy recently. One on local authorities' improvement functions will be published early in the new year, and I am sure that the Parliament will be keen to know the results of that.

I remind the Parliament that, when Graham Donaldson was the chief inspector, the inspectorate was an executive agency, so it has always been answerable to ministers. Therefore, I am not sure that I accept that critique per se.

I am conscious of the time, but it would be remiss of me not to touch on the position in which the Scottish Labour Party finds itself this evening. I am glad that Pam Duncan-Glancy agrees that the SQA needs to be abolished and that there is a need for the post of chief inspector to be created. However, voting for the general principles of the bill at the committee and then adopting a completely different position today is totally incoherent. I have had engagement with the Liberal Democrats and the Green Party, and the meeting with the Conservatives is in the diary, but there has been nothing from the Scottish Labour Party. I hope that Labour will now be able to reach out and engage with me on the amendments that it wants to be lodged, because I know that it supports the principles behind education reform, even if it, strangely, cannot find itself able to back the general principles of the bill today, despite the fact that that was the position that Ms Duncan-Glancy found herself in a matter of weeks ago.

Scotland's teachers are watching today. They expect the Parliament to deliver a replacement for the SQA. In a Parliament of minorities, it will take a collective effort to ensure that the bill does exactly that.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): That concludes the debate on the Education (Scotland) Bill at stage 1.

Point of Order

16:59

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I wish to raise a point of order with you in relation to a matter that was raised in health questions this afternoon. I asked the minister about the cut to the mental health budget in the 2025-26 financial year. The minister said that the premise of my question was incorrect and suggested that the mental health budget had, in fact, increased. As per the Scottish Parliament information centre, which published information on the budget in real terms, £267.2 million was allocated to the mental health budget in 2024-25. In the 2025-26 draft budget, £264.2 million was allocated as a budget line. That is quite an obvious arithmetical real-terms cut of 1.1 per cent. That is published in the Parliament by SPICe.

Presiding Officer, I ask for your advice on a matter of accuracy and on the reporting of financial information to the Parliament, particularly by ministers. Will you be able to offer some guidance, written or otherwise, on how ministers should present financial information to Parliament and parliamentarians?

The Presiding Officer: It is fair to say that some of the matters that Mr Sweeney raises are not for the chair. I repeat, as I have many times, that the content of a member's contribution is ordinarily a matter for the member. Mr Sweeney can raise the matter directly with the member with whom he has a concern. I know that, at this point in the session, members will be aware of the Parliament's corrections mechanism and of how that mechanism operates.

Education (Scotland) Bill: Financial Resolution

17:01

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is consideration of motion S6M-15897, in the name of Shona Robison, on a financial resolution for the Education (Scotland) Bill. I call Jenny Gilruth to move the motion.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament, for the purposes of any Act of the Scottish Parliament resulting from the Education (Scotland) Bill, agrees to any expenditure of a kind referred to in Rule 9.12.3A of the Parliament's Standing Orders arising in consequence of the Act.—[*Jenny Gilruth*]

The Presiding Officer: The question on the motion will be put at decision time.

Business Motions

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-15918, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a business programme.

17:01

The Minister for Parliamentary Business (Jamie Hepburn): I draw members' attention to the debate that we are now scheduling for 9 January, which is a Scottish Government debate on building a migration system that supports Scotland's economy, public services and communities. Last week, I undertook to reschedule the stage 1 debate on Jeremy Balfour's Disability Commissioner (Scotland) Bill, and the motion achieves that.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees—

(a) the following programme of business—

Tuesday 7 January 2025

2.00 pm Time for Reflection
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
followed by Topical Questions (if selected)
followed by Scottish Government Debate: Tackling Child Poverty and Inequality Through the Scottish Budget
followed by Committee Announcements
followed by Business Motions
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 5.00 pm Decision Time
followed by Members' Business
 Wednesday 8 January 2025
 2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 2.00 pm Portfolio Questions: Constitution, External Affairs and Culture, and Parliamentary Business; Justice and Home Affairs
followed by Ministerial Statement: Scotland's Secure Accommodation Capacity
followed by Finance and Public Administration Committee Debate: National Performance Framework - Review of National Outcomes
followed by Business Motions
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
followed by Approval of SSIs (if required)
 5.00 pm Decision Time
followed by Members' Business
 Thursday 9 January 2025

11.40 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 11.40 am General Questions
 12.00 pm First Minister's Questions
followed by Members' Business
 2.30 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 2.30 pm Portfolio Questions: Education and Skills
followed by Scottish Government Debate: Building a Migration System that Supports Scotland's Economy, Public Services and Communities
followed by Business Motions
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 5.00 pm Decision Time
 Tuesday 14 January 2025
 2.00 pm Time for Reflection
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
followed by Topical Questions (if selected)
followed by Scottish Government Business
followed by Committee Announcements
followed by Business Motions
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 5.00 pm Decision Time
followed by Members' Business
 Wednesday 15 January 2025
 2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 2.00 pm Portfolio Questions: Deputy First Minister Responsibilities, Economy and Gaelic; Finance and Local Government
followed by Stage 3 Proceedings: Police (Ethics, Conduct and Scrutiny) (Scotland) Bill
followed by Business Motions
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
followed by Approval of SSIs (if required)
 7.00 pm Decision Time
followed by Members' Business
 Thursday 16 January 2025
 11.40 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 11.40 am General Questions
 12.00 pm First Minister's Questions
followed by Members' Business
 2.30 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 2.30 pm Portfolio Questions: Net Zero and Energy, and Transport
followed by Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee Debate
followed by Business Motions
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time
 followed by Members' Business

(b) that, for the purposes of Portfolio Questions in the week beginning 6 January 2025, in rule 13.7.3, after the word "except" the words "to the extent to which the Presiding Officer considers that the questions are on the same or similar subject matter or" are inserted.

Motion agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next item of business is consideration of business motions S6M-15919, on a stage 1 timetable for a bill, and S6M-15920, on a stage 2 timetable for a bill.

Motions moved,

That the Parliament agrees that consideration of the Criminal Justice Modernisation and Abusive Domestic Behaviour Reviews (Scotland) Bill at stage 1 be completed by 4 April 2025.

That the Parliament agrees that consideration of the Victims, Witnesses, and Justice Reform (Scotland) Bill at stage 2 be completed by 4 April 2025.

Motions agreed to.

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

17:02

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is consideration of two Parliamentary Bureau motions. I ask Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, to move motions S6M-15921, on approval of a Scottish statutory instrument, and S6M-15922, on designation of a lead committee.

Motions moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the Regulated Roles (Prohibitions and Requirements) (Scotland) Regulations 2024 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Delegated Powers and Law Reform Committee be designated as the lead committee in consideration of the Leases (Automatic Continuation etc.) (Scotland) Bill at stage 1.

The Presiding Officer: The questions on the motions will be put at decision time.

Decision Time

17:03

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

There are three questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that motion S6M-15876, in the name of Jenny Gilruth, on the Education (Scotland) Bill, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division. There will be a short suspension to allow members to access the digital voting system.

17:03

Meeting suspended.

17:05

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: We move to the division on motion S6M-15876, in the name of Jenny Gilruth, on the Education (Scotland) Bill at stage 1. Members should cast their votes now.

The vote is closed.

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I could not connect. I would like to abstain.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Ms McNeill. We will ensure that that is recorded.

For

Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)

Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Rona Mackay]
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Jamie Hepburn]
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Jamie Hepburn]
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)

Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Abstentions

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)
Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S6M-15876, in the name of Jenny Gilruth, on the Education (Scotland) Bill at stage 1, is: For 96, Against 0, Abstentions 21.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees to the general principles of the Education (Scotland) Bill.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-15897, in the name of Shona Robison, on a financial resolution for the Education (Scotland) Bill, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament, for the purposes of any Act of the Scottish Parliament resulting from the Education (Scotland) Bill, agrees to any expenditure of a kind referred to in Rule 9.12.3A of the Parliament's Standing Orders arising in consequence of the Act.

The Presiding Officer: I propose to ask a single question on two Parliamentary Bureau motions. Does any member object?

As no member objects, the final question is, that motions S6M-15921, on approval of a Scottish statutory instrument, and S6M-15922, on designation of a lead committee, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, be agreed to.

Motions agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the Regulated Roles (Prohibitions and Requirements) (Scotland) Regulations 2024 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Delegated Powers and Law Reform Committee be designated as the lead committee in consideration of the Leases (Automatic Continuation etc.) (Scotland) Bill at stage 1.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Holyrood Park

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-15634, in the name of Lorna Slater, on a safe, accessible and sustainable Holyrood park for the 21st century. The debate will be concluded without any question being put. I ask members who wish to participate to press their request-to-speak buttons.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament welcomes the recently published *Strategic Plan for Holyrood Park*; recognises what it sees as the benefits of the park to people, nature and heritage; notes the support for the vision for the park, set out in the plan, of an evolving landscape combining human action and natural processes to create a fundamentally sustainable 21st century landscape that responds to the climate emergency, community aspirations, and natural and heritage conservation priorities, all while retaining and strengthening its iconic status for Edinburgh and Scotland; understands that the legislation relating to the park was passed in 1971, and notes the belief that it is in desperate need of updating to meet the new vision for the park, as set out in the strategy; further understands that the implementation of the strategy will aim to conserve and restore nature in the park, refresh the network of paths and trails, provide a safe place for people to gather, meet, play and relax, and will explore opportunities to expand active travel within the park, and notes the belief that all of these aims would be furthered by ending through motor traffic in the park.

17:10

Lorna Slater (Lothian) (Green): I thank those members who have stayed late today to participate in this debate.

Holyrood park is a really special place. From when I first arrived in Edinburgh and used to hike up Arthur's Seat twice a week as a way to get some free regular exercise, through the Covid pandemic, when a weekly circuit of the park was a chance to have a safely distanced chat with a friend, and including those periodic fits of cardiovascular ambition that seize me every few years when I decide that I am going to train up to run all the way around the park, and right up to now, when I have it on my doorstep every day at work, Holyrood park is intertwined with 20 years of my life, and that is true for tens of thousands of people.

Holyrood park is the specific and direct responsibility of Scottish ministers. The legislation that applies to the park was set out in 1971. Scottish ministers have delegated responsibility for looking after the park to Historic Environment Scotland.

Holyrood park is a complicated place. The whole park is designated as a scheduled monument. It is a site of special scientific interest, two of the features of which were in unfavourable

condition when they were last assessed in 2007 and 2013, and one of which has not been assessed since 2001.

The part is used by athletes, families, commuters, dog walkers, cyclists and bird watchers. It is a rat run for city traffic. It hosts events, millions of tourists and even a few MSPs and parliamentary staff taking their lunchtime exercise.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): On the point that the member made about the park being used as a rat run, does she have any data on the reasons why motor vehicles use the park, and a breakdown of the users of those motor vehicles?

Lorna Slater: I do not have that information, but the member is quite right that that is information that we need to have. What is clear, though, is that the park is being used as a through route by people travelling not to the park to enjoy it but through the park as a way of, presumably, avoiding Edinburgh traffic.

There are two themes to my speech today, on which I hope to hear from other members and the minister. The first is about improvements that can and should be made to the park as soon as possible to improve the experience and safety of park users and visitors. The second is a plea to Scottish ministers to put in place the intention and resources to implement a long-term plan for the park. That includes the provision of sufficient human and financial resources to undertake the further work that is proposed in the Holyrood park strategic plan in a timely and effective manner.

I think that that work must include an update to the primary legislation concerning the park, and I think that it should involve a consideration of whether care of the park should be placed with a dedicated local organisation with the remit and resources to take care of it properly. I will come back to that point.

On immediate and pressing matters in the park, I was grateful to the 150 local residents who joined me at a community meeting on Monday evening to set out their concerns and priorities for the park. I also thank Sarah Boyack for coming along to that, as well as several Edinburgh councillors. One person who attended that meeting said to me:

“It’s the first time someone has asked me what I think.”

I will write up the feedback more formally for Historic Environment Scotland, but, at the meeting, the top priorities were suggestions to improve nature in the park and to improve active travel. There were many people calling for cars to be slowed down, traffic to be reduced, or for cars to be banned altogether except for disabled access. There was an enthusiasm to support

activities in the park—everything from football to boating, marathon running to dog walking and cycling—and many people were concerned about the tension between visitor numbers and activities and their effects on wildlife and nature. There were repeated requests for pedestrian crossings, dropped curbs, improved signage and other measures for safety and accessibility, and there was a widely held desire for better public transport to and within the park, with connections to the city and Lothians.

Those are all sensible and reasonable concerns. All of those matters will require consultation and they will require funding. Will the Scottish Government resource this project properly, especially with regard to quickly establishing a credible business plan for the park, so that work can get started?

The most loudly voiced concern at Monday’s meeting was about the restrictions that are currently in place on the Radical Road and how they are in conflict with the Scottish people’s right to roam.

That brings me to my second point. Is the legislation covering the park fit for purpose and is Historic Environment Scotland the right organisation to be managing it? Is it right that the entire park is a scheduled monument, putting it out of sync with the right to roam and with how a public park might reasonably be expected to operate?

The HES employees and rangers whom I have met are truly excellent professionals and I commend their work. However, I fear that they have an impossible job. They are stretched much too thin and do not have the resources that are needed to tackle Holyrood park’s challenges properly. We do not know exactly how many people visit Holyrood park in a year, but estimates are in the millions—maybe even 5 million. Compare that to the Loch Lomond and the Trossachs national park, which hosts about 4 million visitors a year and has an annual budget from the Scottish Government of £13.9 million, or the Cairngorms national park, which hosts 2 million visitors and has a budget of £8 million. I was not able to find information on exactly how much HES spends on Holyrood park in a year, but with £74 million from the Scottish Government, it has to manage over 300 properties. That averages out to less than £250,000 per property.

The strategic plan for Holyrood park mentions 21 HES employees who support the park, but those same 21 also look after other properties in Scotland. Compare that with a staff of 110 for the Cairngorms national park and 137 at the Loch Lomond and the Trossachs national park.

Reimagining Holyrood Park is a massive and complex project, involving scheduled monuments, SSSIs, a busy commuter route and a tourist venue, starting from a state of eroded paths and very damaged nature. The slow response to issues such as the closure of the Radical Road and the delays to publishing the strategic plan, however welcome that plan is, give the impression that HES is hopelessly under-resourced to take on that work.

Holyrood Park, with its millions of visitors, its complex landscape and its variety of users, needs resources and democratic governance that are much more comparable with those of a national park.

We have an opportunity to reimagine Holyrood park, and I hope that the Scottish Government will step up to the challenge.

I look forward to hearing from other members this evening.

17:18

Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): I pay tribute to Lorna Slater for bringing this motion and subject area to the Parliament for debate.

I have a long attachment to Holyrood park. My best pal when I was very young used to live on Royal Park Terrace, and going into Holyrood park was an almost weekly occurrence. Anyone who has grown up in or moved to Edinburgh and feels attached to the city has a connection to the park. The skyline of Arthur's Seat is something that moves us, inspires us and unites us on a daily and yearly basis.

Of course, Holyrood Park is connected to Leith, which I represent, and is used by many Leithers and those who live in the north-eastern part of our capital city.

I note the proposals in the strategic plan, and I have taken a lot out of it as I have looked through it. However, I did not support the motion, because I feel that I need to examine the situation a bit more carefully.

A lot of the recommendations in the strategic plan—for example, on the Radical Road, rock fall and improvement of the public paths—are powerful, and raise issues to be pursued.

An issue that is perhaps more contentious, and on which it is difficult to strike a balance, is the traffic question, on which other members have commented. How do we ensure, on the one hand, that we improve opportunities for active travel while, on the other hand, enabling people to connect across our capital city?

I have spoken in the Parliament previously about the campaign in which my father was involved to stop an inner ring road being built through Edinburgh, which would have decimated parts of Edinburgh, including, in particular, my constituency and that of the Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture. Since that period, however, we have really struggled, in the capital city, to get the balance right in respect of connectivity: increasing pedestrianisation and opportunities for active travel while also having effective motor vehicle routes that enable efficient transport through the city. That is partly because we have clogged up the bypass, which has caused a lot of issues—anyway, I digress.

My point is that for people who are travelling from the centre to the east, the avenue through Holyrood park is quite an important way through for drivers, in particular as Salamander Street, in my constituency, is so congested. Those are areas to consider, and it is good that we have this opportunity to talk about it.

Lorna Slater is right to highlight the 1971 regulations. Her point is connected to a broader point that is pertinent to other parks in our capital city, which are regulated through primary legislation. The City of Edinburgh District Council Order Confirmation Act 1991 is relevant to that question. The 1991 act, for good reason, prevents certain forms of development in a number of parks, including Princes Street gardens and Leith links.

As a representative, I have seen various proposals—whether it is Leith Athletic Football Club wanting to upgrade its changing rooms; the ambition to have a skate park in Leith Links; or things that other organisations, such as Street Soccer Scotland, have wanted to do in the past—that would, if they involved new buildings on Leith Links, require a piece of primary legislation to be passed by the Parliament. That was most recently done in 2014, so that a statue of John Rattray, who invented the rules of golf, could be erected on Leith Links. If we are going to consider a piece of primary legislation relating to Holyrood park, we might want to broaden it out and see whether modernisation is required with regard to how we regulate development and change in parks across Edinburgh as a whole.

Whether it involves Holyrood park, Leith Links or Princes Street gardens, there are improvements that we could make, and want to make, but we do not want to be in a position in which an act of Parliament requires to be passed each time that that happens. There is then a question of delegation to the local authority—as long as it does not, once again, come up with the idea of building an inner ring road.

17:23

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): I congratulate Lorna Slater on bringing the debate to the chamber. I grew up in Edinburgh and spent a great deal of time in the park, so I recognise the sentiments that are expressed in her motion. There is no doubt that the wide open spaces, the stunning scenery and the beautiful wildlife provide an oasis of calm in the midst of busy city life, or when commuting.

When I used to stay over in Newington, I had the pleasure of cycling in, and I often saw MSPs and staff running through the park. Lorna Slater is right, therefore, that we should seek to protect and nurture the park and I, too, welcome the strategic plan. I also welcome her call to strive to achieve a park that is safe, accessible and sustainable, and which benefits people, nature and heritage.

I am, however, disappointed at the throwaway mention in the final line of the motion that:

“these aims would be furthered by ending ... motor traffic in the park.”

In her remarks, Lorna Slater failed to justify that proposition evidentially—although, commendably, she conceded that there is a massive lack of data in that area. I think that her proposition comes across as a solution in search of a problem. She has given us no data on pollution, which is a pity, as there could have been an interesting exercise around the negative and unintended consequences of Edinburgh’s draconian low-emission zone moving traffic around.

Ben Macpherson: Would Liam Kerr agree that we need to consider that a lot of people drive to Holyrood park in order to walk around it, and that there is currently a lack of connectivity in terms of bus routes? There is only one bus route that stops in the right place to enable people to access the park.

Liam Kerr: That is an important point, which I intend to return to because it is so important.

The lack of data—Lorna Slater conceded that we do not have the data—on why people use the park is relevant. For example, we do not have data on accident statistics or on what the users of the park think. I concede that Lorna Slater talked about a meeting in which she said that local residents were present and gave their important views. However, the users and the local residents are not necessarily the same people.

To go back to Ben Macpherson’s point, I note that Lorna Slater also conceded that we do not have data on why people are driving in the park, who they are and how they can be broken down. Absent that data, I can only make similar assertions. The road through the park serves as a convenient and scenic route connecting the city

centre of Edinburgh with areas such as Duddingston village. If cars are banned, residents will presumably be required to take a lengthy detour to reach places such as Meadowbank, Abbeyhill, the city centre and Leith Walk. That wastes time and creates unnecessary extra traffic, both stationary and moving, which in turn increases pollution in areas where the urban environment will prevent its dissipation. Data on the destinations of traffic through the park would, therefore, be welcome.

Secondly, my colleague Jeremy Balfour tells me that banning cars will significantly hinder the ability of disabled people and those with mobility issues to enjoy the park. For those people, a car is not a luxury—it is the only way that they can get about. Jeremy Balfour made the point to me that such a ban tells disabled people—these are his words, mind—that they are not allowed to enjoy the same access to that beautiful space as those who do not struggle with mobility.

Lorna Slater: Will the member take an intervention?

Liam Kerr: Will I have time, Presiding Officer?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Yes. Briefly, Ms Slater.

Lorna Slater: I am grateful to the member for taking an intervention. I was clear in my speech that the requests from people at the community meeting were to ban cars except where they are needed for disabled access. Car Free Holyrood is campaigning to stop a through route for cars, not to stop people driving to the park in order to enjoy it. I want to be clear on that point.

Liam Kerr: I take the point, but Car Free Holyrood describes itself, in the very first line of its website, as

“a group of local residents”.

That goes back to my point that we are talking about a much wider group. The views of those residents are extremely important, but we have to look at who the users are, and we do not have data on that.

On that note, I thought it was interesting that the briefing to members from Ramblers Scotland said that two thirds of people responding to the consultation that led to the strategy that we are discussing mentioned difficulty accessing routes and areas of the park. That will not be solved by closing the road.

It is a pity that Lorna Slater has put an unevicenced—and, some might say, ideological—demand for closure in what is an otherwise reasonable motion. It comes across as ill-thought-through prejudice that potentially has negative consequences for many park users.

Like Lorna Slater, I welcome the strategic plan and I hope that it achieves its vision for promoting a safe, accessible and sustainable park, but I hope that her vendetta against private motor vehicles, both in the park and more widely, is consigned to history.

17:28

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): I, too, congratulate Lorna Slater on bringing the debate to the chamber, because the park is important—indeed, it is vital—for people, nature and heritage. As others have said, the park has incredible views across the city, and it is an important resource for people, whether they are using it for exercise or looking to explore the nature, heritage or geology of the park.

I thank Lorna Slater for holding the consultation on Monday this week to continue the discussions that have been on-going—for years, I have to say—about the future of the park, how visitor experiences can be improved and the challenges that need to be addressed. This is not the first time that communities have been consulted. Last December, we had an excellent meeting with the Edinburgh Geological Society, Ramblers Scotland, the Cockburn Association, Mountaineering Scotland and ScotWays. The focus of that meeting was the urgent need to reopen the Radical Road, a vital part of the park's history that has now been closed for years. Strong arguments were put forward to call on Historic Environment Scotland to invest in making the park safe, in order to allow people not just to access the incredible views from the Radical Road but to access and explore the geology of the park. At Monday's meeting, the point was made forcibly that nothing had happened since that meeting last year. There is a bit of frustration because, although people get consulted, there is a sense that we need more action.

Another important point that was made on Monday was on the need for an inclusive approach involving local schools in the park, given that it is a superb resource, which would give young people access to the park and, thus, benefit their education. We could perhaps do with better signposting so that people can maximise the benefits of visiting the park and understand its nature, heritage and geology.

Tourism opportunities were also raised at Monday's meeting, as they have been on regular occasions. Historic Environment Scotland notes in its park strategy that the park raises £1.8 billion a year in income generated, which is a huge amount of money. That is a big part not just of Edinburgh's tourism offer but of Scotland's tourism offer.

There is a huge amount that we can be proud of, but there are some key issues, such as the legislation needing to be updated, as has been mentioned by several members. I look forward to hearing the final analysis of Monday's meeting.

The points made by Ben Macpherson summarised the challenges of maximising walking and cycling and ensuring access for people with disabilities—points that have been made from around the chamber—as well as the issue of traffic, which is controversial but really important to get right. The idea of banning traffic in the park has been raised on numerous occasions over the years, and it is hotly debated by local residents. I declare an interest as a local resident. I will not say exactly where, but members can probably work it out. I cycle through the park extremely regularly.

Like the constituents who have written to me, I regularly see heavy goods vehicles and commercial vehicles, which are not allowed to drive through the park. However, there is no monitoring or enforcement of the rule about HGVs and commercial vehicles not being allowed, which adds to the number of vehicles going through the park and creates a sense of unsafety, particularly when big vehicles pass one another, as the road was not designed for that.

We need a more joined-up approach and, speaking as a former town planner, I think that we need more of a strategic approach. As Ben Macpherson has mentioned, we need better public transport. Since the meeting that we held in December last year, the number 12 bus has now been running on a Sunday and further into the evening, although that does not really meet the needs of people in the area. We need a strategic approach and an enforcement approach.

One issue that has been raised several times is that of financial support for Historic Environment Scotland. Its staff have to do a huge amount of work, and there is an issue around the nature of what we need to get fixed in the park. Northfield and Willowbrae community council's submission to Historic Environment Scotland's consultation contains some suggestions of practical changes and improvements to walking and cycling in the park that could be done now and do not need to take a decade. It also suggests access steps up to St Leonard's.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You will need to bring your remarks to a close, please, Ms Boyack.

Sarah Boyack: We have had lots of debates on the issue; we need action. I hope that the cabinet secretary will pick up on the points that have been made about funding, legislation and a strategic approach being taken with the city council to work on traffic solutions so that, if we come back in six

months, we might have a group that works to support the park and to make progress.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Ms Boyack. We will need to move on. I am conscious that the carol service in the Parliament commences at 6 pm, and we do not want to do anything that would delay it. Many visitors are coming along to it this cold evening—hopefully travelling by public transport.

17:34

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): I thank Lorna Slater for bringing the debate to the chamber. It is two decades since we opened this building, but this is probably the first debate on Holyrood park. That is surprising, because the park and the Parliament are so intertwined.

The park has inspired generations of people who live, work and play around it, and it has huge cultural significance. Sir Walter Scott wrote these words about the park many years ago:

“When a piece of scenery so beautiful, yet so varied,—so exciting by its intricacy, and yet so sublime,—is lighted up by the tints of morning or of evening, and displays all that variety of shadowy depth, exchanged with partial brilliancy ... the effect approaches near to enchantment.”

That is the view from the windows of our Parliament today. It is enchanting. We see the ever-changing light on the crags that marks the passage of the days and the seasons.

Recently, I have become reacquainted with the park. I am on a bit of a health kick and have started trying to run round Queen’s Drive in the early mornings. It is astonishing how many people are out running, walking, cycling and wheeling. The park is so well used.

As I puff my way up Queen’s Drive under the crags every morning, I am struck by how polluted that stretch of road is during rush hour. I see a number of cars going past that are clearly non-compliant with the low-emission zone. As I am running along, I feel my chest start to tighten. I do not have the data that Liam Kerr perhaps wants, but I have a sense of the fumes and particulates affecting my lungs. As a member of the cross-party group on lung health and an air quality champion in the Parliament, I am concerned about my health and the health of people running through the park at that time. I ask members in the Lothians and local councillors whether it is appropriate that 8.5 million car trips pass through a park such as this every year. I do not think that it is. There needs to be a better balance. *[Interruption.]*

Mark Ruskell: I am not sure that there is time to take an intervention, is there, Presiding Officer?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There is no additional time, but it is up to the member.

Mark Ruskell: I am sorry, but I would like to continue.

If one goes to other global cities that have iconic parks, such as Central park in New York, they will see that they have in place traffic restrictions and speed enforcement. The aspiration of a car-free Holyrood is a good one. It is disappointing not to see more consideration of what restrictions and limitations could be included in the strategic plan.

As I continue my morning run up the hill past Dunsapie loch, other things strike me, as well. There is a lack of interpretation for visitors. Given the extent of the archaeology, geology and history, and the protected nature sites in the park, there is a story to be told, so it is disappointing not to see more interpretation provided.

I also see that the footpaths on Arthur’s Seat are pretty wrecked. That is not surprising, given the huge number of visitors who enjoy the park every year. However, there is a need for investment and for the strategy to consider those things.

Finally, as I head back to Holyrood, I pass the gates that are currently restricting access to the Radical Road, which have been in place since 2018. They are clearly out of place. We need the Radical Road to be reopened. I would like HES to provide a clear timetable on that in the new year.

HES has taken a very risk-averse approach. We have seen that with the high-level masonry programme, which has partially closed many attractions across Scotland. We are talking about a public path that is prone to rockfalls. There is learning to be taken from elsewhere—such as from our national cycle network—about how to manage those risks. HES could learn from Sustrans about how to open up the Radical Road in a responsible way. It is good to see that commitment in the strategy.

Again, I thank Lorna Slater. I look forward to seeing the improvements that will come, I hope, when I am out on my morning run in the years ahead.

17:39

Ash Regan (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba): I, too, thank Lorna Slater for bringing the debate to the chamber.

I am the constituency member for Holyrood park, and I am very passionate about the future of this iconic space, with it being used well for all of us in our capital city. However, I point out, as others have done, that it is a key link—a key route—through the city centre for my Edinburgh Eastern constituents. We need to take that into

account when we are having this debate. Since the consultation was published last year, I have been inundated with constituents' concerns about the perceived threat to this key commuter and business access route. We need certainty that Holyrood park will continue to be an asset to the people who live here and do business here, and to those who want to visit here.

Through thoughtful planning, consultation and practical measures, I believe that the co-existence of road users, walkers and cyclists in Holyrood park can be balanced. That has managed to be done in other areas. Major cities such as Copenhagen have proven that practical and not ideological solutions can drive meaningful environmental improvement by promoting the co-existence of residents, businesses and tourists. When I was lucky enough to visit Copenhagen last year, I got the sense that it is a city that values all its citizens, whether they are pedestrians, cyclists or car drivers.

I will highlight a couple of constituents' comments that were sent to me by email. One constituent said:

"The consultation openly avoided asking the questions on road closure and is flawed. It is designed to draw responses on nature's health history and all the benefits the park holds but is designed to show these are incompatible with vehicle access. This is not the case, and both can co-exist especially as it closes at weekends when commuting reduces."

Another constituent said:

"I'm growing frustrated by road closures in the park, taking away my ability to drive up there whenever I'd like and enjoy the views as I have done since I was a child."

To ensure community buy-in, we have to promote community involvement. I think that Liam Kerr made that point when he said that we have to listen to residents right across the city and take their views into account. We need to engage with residents, including my constituents who use the park and the road system in the park, as well as cycling and walking organisations, to ensure that we get a decision-making process that works for everyone.

A traffic survey that was done in September 2021 took place when many people were still working from home after the pandemic. I do not think that that indicates a way to solve the issues around road access in 2024 and beyond, now that people are being encouraged back into the city centre to work, shop and enjoy hospitality.

Lorna Slater: Will the member take an intervention?

Ash Regan: Do I have time, Presiding Officer?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There is no additional time. It is up to you.

Ash Regan: I do not think that I have time—I am sorry.

There are many ways to enhance environmental sustainability, including through the promotion of walking, cycling and the use of electric vehicles where necessary, but I feel that we have to take on board the fact that people are absolutely fed up of being dictated to when it impacts their ability to live and work in their own city. We need to take that point on board. We have to work with residents and businesses, not against them, to ensure that the future of Holyrood park is one in which there is a balanced co-existence that enables all users of the park to feel valued in Scotland's capital city.

17:43

The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): I want to close the debate by thanking Lorna Slater for lodging the motion. I recognise and welcome her on-going engagement on this important issue and her interest in the future management of Holyrood park, the north-west of which is in my Edinburgh Central constituency.

As we have heard from the various testimonials from esteemed colleagues across the chamber, Holyrood park means many things to many people. It is a place to connect with one another, our nature and our history; it is a place to inspire us and to spark physical activity and creative energies; and it is a place to educate us, to demonstrate the powerful volcanic geology beneath our feet and, sadly, to show us the impacts of climate change.

It is important that the balance of elements that makes Holyrood park so special is maintained. The many combinations of meaning that people experience during their visits add depth and complexity to the management of the park. Those management responsibilities are handled by Historic Environment Scotland on behalf of Scottish ministers, as Holyrood park is a property in care.

As was discussed earlier, HES published the strategic plan for Holyrood park in September 2024. That clearly defines the purpose of the park in terms of positive impacts on health, wellbeing, climate and economic factors, and in terms of community connections, shared history and local and national identity.

The plan also recognises that Holyrood park is an important element of the tourism offer for Edinburgh. The park, which contains a mountain in the city, provides a unique and outstanding visitor experience that enables tourists and residents

alike to connect with nature and their shared history right in the heart of the capital.

It will never be an easy task to manage such a popular central site, especially one such as Holyrood park, which already has a wealth of designations, from sites of special scientific interest, listed buildings and conservation areas to world heritage site status and scheduled monument protections. However, significant legislation is in place to ensure that such a unique site is managed appropriately. Those regulations and designations are carefully followed by Historic Environment Scotland while it endeavours to deliver an accessible and diverse asset for the people of Scotland.

Any suggested changes to the legislative protections for the park will, of course, be considered in due course, following due process and collaboration. I encourage colleagues who have an informed interest in the matter to share their views with me and the Government, as I will then share those views with Historic Environment Scotland, which I will meet early next year.

Sarah Boyack: I very much welcome that offer. If the cabinet secretary could raise with HES the issue of HGVs and commercial vehicles in particular, that would be superb.

Angus Robertson: I will be happy to do that and to raise anything else that colleagues wish me to raise. I am happy to give that assurance.

As I stated earlier, the park means many different things to people and, as such, it is important to note that the strategic plan was not crafted in isolation and then enforced on unsuspecting park users. Historic Environment Scotland conducted extensive face-to-face public and stakeholder engagement, and it ran an online citizen space public survey and consultation, which took place over 12 weeks, from September to December 2023. That work gathered just under 5,000 returns—I have no doubt that some of the members in the chamber today were included in those returns.

The returns were then analysed, and the resulting consultation report was published in September 2024 and can be found on the Historic Environment Scotland website. By carefully examining those varying views, Historic Environment Scotland has been able to use an evidence-based approach to consider how the park is currently used, the perceived issues and priorities for the park and how park users see the role of the park in the context of Edinburgh, both now and in the future.

As we have heard, one issue that elicits divergent views is traffic management in the park area. I am fully aware that there are still issues to be addressed with regard to the park, and the

strategic plan does not include a final movement strategy for it. Such a strategy is being developed by Historic Environment Scotland in collaboration with the City of Edinburgh Council, and it will align with the council's "City Mobility Plan 2021-2030". In addition, detailed surveys will be required to inform the plans for future traffic movement and active travel to ensure a sustainable future for the park.

I am pleased that Historic Environment Scotland is engaging with the local authority and Police Scotland to consider the implications of future proposals, as well as ensuring that further research and development will take place with park users and residents. In considering traffic management in the park, Historic Environment Scotland is looking at ways to make it easier and safer for people of all ages and abilities to choose healthier and happier travel options that will allow them to continue to access and enjoy that high-quality public space.

Similarly, access to geological features in the park should be permitted where it is safe. I know that there is a real risk posed by rockfalls, especially around the Radical Road and Samson's Ribs. That risk to the health and safety of park users, rangers and contractors needs to be carefully assessed and managed to ensure that Historic Environment Scotland is able to meet its legal responsibilities for public safety. Although I appreciate that there can be frustration at such measures, it is paramount that the highest priority be given to the health and safety of all park users and workers.

In summary, although there are still areas of on-going work, overall, the creation and implementation of the strategic plan is welcome, as is the on-going community involvement and consultation. Historic Environment Scotland continues to navigate the delicate balance of connection between our communities, our natural world and our history. I take the opportunity to extend my special thanks to the small team of Historic Environment Scotland rangers and parks ground staff who do such excellent work covering the on-the-ground services for everyone who enjoys using the park.

I reiterate my thanks to Lorna Slater for her interest in Holyrood park, and to Historic Environment Scotland for encouraging park users to share their views and help to shape the future of the park. I am so pleased that Holyrood park continues to offer such rich opportunities for our local community, our understanding of history and our experience of nature, right here in the heart of our capital city.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, cabinet secretary, and thank you, members, for

your co-operation with the time limitations this evening. That concludes the debate.

Meeting closed at 17:50.

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