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Scottish Parliament

Wednesday 8 January 2025

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

Portfolio Question Time

Constitution, External Affairs and Culture, and Parliamentary Business

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): Good afternoon. The first item of business this afternoon is portfolio questions. The first portfolio is constitution, external affairs and culture, and parliamentary business.

Music Venues

1. Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government how it supports music venues. (S6O-04153)

The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): The Scottish Government values the importance of the music industry to Scotland's culture. We have demonstrated our commitment to the culture sector through an increase of more than £34 million in funding for 2025-26 and by introducing new tax relief for hospitality premises, which will benefit smaller music venues. I urge members of the Scottish Parliament of all parties to vote for the budget in February to ensure that that transformational funding for Scotland's culture sector is secured.

Murdo Fraser: Notwithstanding what the cabinet secretary says about the budget, there are very real concerns in the sector about the viability of music venues. The budget gives 40 per cent rates relief but, unlike in England, that is capped at £51,000 of rateable value. That means that one third of venues that are associated with the Music Venue Trust are not eligible for support, including the likes of NiceNSleazy in Glasgow, the Voodoo Rooms in Edinburgh and Hootananny in Inverness, which are getting no support. How will the cabinet secretary, through the budget, secure the future of the venues that are currently feeling the pinch?

Angus Robertson: The Scottish Government recognises the role that grass-roots music venues play in supporting the talent pipeline. We will introduce a 40 per cent relief for mainland hospitality premises, including grass-roots music venues with a capacity of up to 1,500 and those with a rateable value of up to and including £51,000, and that relief will be capped at £110,000

per business. Further detail will be set out in secondary legislation in due course. That relief will reduce overheads and support the wider cultural ecosystem and the night-time economy. However, if Murdo Fraser has any proposals to widen, deepen and broaden support for the culture sector, I will be happy to look closely at them.

Foysoyl Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): As Murdo Fraser said, unlike in England, the Scottish Government's rates relief proposals are limited to venues with a rateable value of under £51,000. Music Venue Trust analysis shows that 19 venues will miss out due to the cap, including the Voodoo Rooms in the cabinet secretary's constituency, which will pay more than larger venues. Given the soaring costs for grass-roots music venues in recent years, does the cabinet secretary agree that further and more targeted support is needed?

Angus Robertson: I am all in favour of more targeted support. As Foysoyl Choudhury knows, the Government's proposals in the forthcoming budget are for the biggest-ever increase in culture and arts sector funding outside the Covid recovery period. I am open to looking at proposals for further and increased support beyond that.

However, to be honest, if members of the Scottish Parliament or Opposition parties wish for additional support for culture and the arts, the first thing that they will have to do is vote for the budget.

Independent Cinemas

2. Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how it is supporting independent cinemas. (S6O-04154)

The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): The Scottish Government recognises the value of independent cinemas to our communities, and we continue to work closely with Screen Scotland and partners to support the development of such cinemas for Scotland's audiences today and in the long term.

Screen Scotland's strategy and its funding, which will increase by £2 million in 2025-26, support inclusive and sustainable growth of our screen sector, with a focus on ensuring wide access to cinema and a diverse range of screen content. That includes support for cultural cinema venues, organisations, touring programmes, independent film exhibitors and the distribution of Scottish titles across Scotland.

Audrey Nicoll: Since 2023, the Scottish Government, through Screen Scotland, has supported the campaign to reopen the Belmont cinema in Aberdeen through distribution of operational expenditure, which has allowed the

charity Belmont Community Cinema Ltd to hire several staff who are working tirelessly to reopen that iconic venue in the granite city. Can the cabinet secretary provide further detail on any funding in the proposed Scottish budget that could help to ensure the reopening of that cornerstone of Aberdeen's cultural ecosystem?

Angus Robertson: I very much recognise the huge value that the Belmont and cultural cinema as a whole bring to Scotland's creative landscape. Cinemas such as the Belmont are a vital source of cultural experience, community connection, learning and wellbeing. Since the cinema's closure in 2022, Screen Scotland has provided £320,000 in funding to support reopening of the Belmont.

The budget for 2025-26 includes a further £20 million for Creative Scotland for its multiyear funding programme, which will enable Creative Scotland to roll out that programme, thereby ensuring that the highest-ever number of artists and organisations receive regular funding.

The Scottish Government will continue to liaise with Screen Scotland to explore all viable options to deliver sustainable cultural cinema for our communities right across Scotland.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): A reopened Belmont would be transformational for Aberdeen and the north-east, so it is disappointing to hear no capital support figure being talked about in that answer from the cabinet secretary, given that the Government has—commendably—made millions of pounds available for similar projects in Glasgow and Edinburgh.

Will the cabinet secretary meet representatives of Belmont Community Cinema Ltd, including the new chief executive officer, prior to the budget, hopefully to agree to send capital funding north of the central belt?

Angus Robertson: I have already met representatives of the Belmont cinema, and I will always be happy to meet them about any particular ask. What would be most disappointing, to be frank, is if MSPs were to abstain or to vote against the biggest-ever support for culture and the arts in Scotland. It is one thing to wish for the outcomes, but another to do so without supporting the means. If Conservative or Labour colleagues want to turn up week in, week out, month after month, saying that they support culture, they should actually vote for it.

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): Many areas in Scotland do not have access to any cinemas at all and rely on the Screen Machine to experience film. The Scottish Government has previously stated that it would consider all options for purchasing a new Screen Machine, because the current one is leased and is not suitable for all locations.

In the light of the record funding settlement for the Scottish Government by the new United Kingdom Labour Government, and the fact that the two previous Screen Machines were procured by the previous Labour and Liberal Democrat Scottish Government, what support is the Scottish Government proposing to provide in order to purchase a new Screen Machine?

Angus Robertson: As Neil Bibby knows, the Scottish Government budget proposes an increase in support for Screen Scotland, which is Scotland's national agency that deals with film and television. He will also be aware of the Scottish Government's commitment to supporting the availability of cinema to communities. Screen Machine has played a leading part in all that.

I gently say to colleagues from Opposition parties that there is absolutely zero credibility in turning up to the chamber and saying that one wishes for more to be spent on culture and the arts when—apparently—they are going to abstain when the question comes before the chamber.

Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland) (Lab): I thank the minister for his encouraging words in support of the work of Belmont Community Cinema Ltd, and I add Labour's support for that endeavour.

I ask the cabinet secretary to outline exactly how much funding will be allocated to the reopening of the Belmont cinema. I hear him talking about additional funding going to the culture budget, with £2 million being set aside for Screen Scotland, but is he able to give a figure for what the Government will provide to support the Belmont cinema?

Angus Robertson: That is the first time that I am hearing that we will have Labour's support for the budget, which I very much welcome, and I look forward to Mercedes Villalba voting for the increase in culture and arts funding when it comes before the chamber.

I will be content to write to her and other colleagues who have been asking specifically about the Belmont. As the member probably knows, I lived in Aberdeen for some time and was happy to support the Belmont. I would look forward to its succeeding in the future. I have already met the team who are running the cinema, and I will look at every way in which we could support it.

Employer National Insurance Contribution Increase (Impact on Culture Sector)

3. **Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on its assessment of the potential impact of the United Kingdom Government's decision to increase employer

national insurance contributions on the culture sector. (S6O-04155)

The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): The First Minister and the president of the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities wrote to the Chancellor of the Exchequer on 3 January, supported by 48 public and voluntary sector organisations, to raise concerns about the impact of the increase in employer national insurance contributions and to seek clarity on funding. The estimated impact of the UK Government's decision on the five culture public bodies is as follows: £1.046 million for the three national collections, £1.7 million for Historic Environment Scotland and £150,000 for Creative Scotland. Early estimates suggest an additional liability of £250,000 for National Records of Scotland's core staffing costs.

Emma Roddick: I know that many culture organisations in the Highlands, such as Eden Court theatre, warmly welcomed the suggested £34 million increase to culture spending. However, I also heard concerns from those organisations that they are going to have little choice but to spend the bulk of that additional funding on mitigating the impact of Labour's national insurance changes. For Eden Court, the impact is estimated to be about £100,000 a year.

In the light of that, what consideration is the cabinet secretary giving to ensuring that culture organisations in Scotland, including all those that are waiting for grant decisions from Creative Scotland later this month, can still make the most of that increased funding from the Scottish Government to create and innovate?

Angus Robertson: Emma Roddick makes a good point. Although the Scottish Government is committed to investing a further £34 million in culture, which will be transformational for the sector, the UK Labour Government is undermining that good work with its plan to increase national insurance contribution costs. That will impact through increased NI contributions for cultural venues, including Eden Court, and it might erode the benefits of the significant culture funding increase.

That is why the First Minister and the president of the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, supported by 48 public and voluntary sector organisations, wrote to the Chancellor of the Exchequer on 3 January to raise concerns about the impact of the increase to employer national insurance contributions and to seek clarity on funding. I hope that we will get a positive response.

Arts, Culture and Creative Sector

4. Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to grow Scotland's arts, culture and creative sector. (S6O-04156)

The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): The Scottish Government has committed a further £34 million to the culture sector for the next financial year. That will result in the biggest increase in culture funding in the history of the Parliament, after Covid recovery support, and it takes the total uplift to date to £50 million. That is a huge vote of confidence in our culture sector, and it will help to protect this treasured sector and the impact that it makes on people's lives. I hope that Daniel Johnson will vote for that.

Daniel Johnson: The cabinet secretary might have seen an article that was published in the past couple of days on the BBC website that was titled "How did Scotland become a Hollywood hotspot?" The point is that culture is not just about spend—it can be big business, with big investments and big sums of money being spent in Scotland. The discussions that I have had with the creative sector have been about not just the quantum but the structure of the funding.

What discussions has the cabinet secretary had with Scottish Enterprise, South of Scotland Enterprise and Highlands and Islands Enterprise, along with the Scottish National Investment Bank, about how culture spending can be implemented in a way that is compatible with wider enterprise and investment strategies across public policy areas?

Angus Robertson: That is a thoughtful question from Daniel Johnson. He raises points that will be reflected in the forthcoming review of the operation of Creative Scotland. He is right to point out that it is not just about the main vehicle of public funding to support creative and artistic organisations. We have national performing companies and national organisations, such as galleries, libraries and museums, and the structure of the funding needs to be thought about right across the piece. That also involves the likes of our enterprise agencies. If the member has specific suggestions, I would be very keen to see them—as, I am sure, the incoming chair of the review would be.

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): It is very difficult for the arts, culture and creative sector to continue to thrive when councils across Scotland are proposing devastating cuts that will decimate the funding of music services and affect the sector's future. What action is the Scottish Government taking to negate these ill-

conceived proposals, which will possibly see the removal, after 60 years, of instrumental and vocal teaching from our communities?

Angus Robertson: As Alexander Stewart knows, I am a great supporter of music teaching in schools, and I would be greatly concerned if there was any diminution of that, because this Government has a good record of supporting teaching across Scotland. I am content to write to him to give him more detail on that.

The forthcoming budget provides for additional resources for local government and for record funding for culture and the arts. If Mr Stewart is keen for local government and the sector to have the means to make that provision, I hope that he will vote for that in the budget and not just raise questions at question time. He actually has a vote—he can influence things—and I hope that he will vote for the budget.

Glasgow School of Art Mackintosh Building Restoration

5. Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the progress to restore the Mackintosh building of the Glasgow School of Art. (S6O-04157)

The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): The Mackintosh building is owned by the Glasgow School of Art, which has responsibility for its own strategic and operational decision making. The Scottish Government understands that work by external architects is in progress on the Mackintosh building project.

According to the Glasgow School of Art, this work aims to ensure that the delivery of the Mackintosh project continues to be evidence based and that the building is successfully rebuilt as a working school of art to support the regeneration of Sauchiehall Street and Glasgow city centre.

Proposals are expected to be completed and published early this year. The Scottish Government and the Scottish Funding Council will continue to engage closely with the Glasgow School of Art as it progresses its plans for the Mackintosh building.

Paul Sweeney: I am sure that the cabinet secretary will share my admiration of the achievement of the French people in the successful restoration of Notre-Dame de Paris that was completed last month, little over five years after the fire. However, more than seven years on from the fire here, there has still been very little progress on the restoration of Glasgow School of Art, Scotland's greatest architectural achievement.

This year, in the 850th anniversary of the granting of Glasgow's borough charter, will the cabinet secretary agree to convene a cross-Government summit with the architectural sector in Scotland to bring together a special-purpose vehicle or a special sponsor body to take forward the Glasgow School of Art restoration project? That project is currently being stymied by the ongoing litigation and dispute with the insurers and the Glasgow School of Art. The project is simply too big and complex to be left to the Glasgow School of Art alone. It is a national project and should be treated as such.

Angus Robertson: I share Paul Sweeney's admiration for the restoration of Notre-Dame de Paris and the speed with which that was completed. The people of Paris and of France can be very proud of that restoration project.

As I have already outlined, proposals on the Glasgow School of Art are expected to be completed and published early this year, and I would be content to convene a meeting to discuss what emerges from those proposals. I know that Paul Sweeney does not want any further unnecessary delays, and I do not want any either. I support the speediest restoration that is possible.

Arts and Culture Funding

6. Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how its draft budget will support the arts and culture sector in 2025-26, including through the provision of multiyear funding programmes for artists and cultural organisations. (S6O-04158)

The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): Through the budget, we will provide an increase of £20 million for Creative Scotland's multiyear funding programme, as well as further increases for the national collections and the national performing companies.

In addition, we will ring fence new funding to support festivals across Scotland; to improve digital access to our public libraries; to restart and extend community-led arts and creativity programmes; and to develop a culture and heritage capacity fund.

We will also carry out a review of how the culture sector is supported, which will include a review of Creative Scotland, to ensure that Government funding achieves the greatest possible impact.

Collette Stevenson: In East Kilbride, there are many talented individuals and groups, some of whom have expressed concern to me about the fact that funding application processes can inadvertently exclude some artists due to the complexity of the process. What consideration has

been given to harnessing creativity by improving access to funding for groups that consider themselves to be excluded or disadvantaged by what they consider to be a complex application process?

Angus Robertson: I appreciate—as, I suspect, do MSPs across the chamber—the importance of the Creative Scotland multiyear funding process, and I look forward to Creative Scotland announcing the outcome of that process later this month. I have heard concerns about the complex nature of the application process, and I expect that to form part of the review of Creative Scotland that was announced in the programme for government in September.

Next week, we will launch a survey that will help to inform the scope of the review of Creative Scotland and the wider work on how the culture sector is supported. If Collette Stevenson or other colleagues have feedback from within the culture and arts community on the application processes or any other reflections on Creative Scotland, I encourage them to take part in the forthcoming review.

Alignment with European Union

7. Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on Scotland's alignment with the EU, including in relation to the digital single market. (S6O-04159)

The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): The Scottish Government laid its latest comprehensive reports on its policy of alignment with the European Union on 31 October, and I provided evidence on the topic to the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee on 21 November. The reports detailed that Scotland continues to align with the European Union where that is possible and meaningful in protecting and advancing high standards, and they set out our priorities for working with the EU across the full range of devolved policy areas, including the digital economy.

Willie Coffey: It is now nearly five years since the United Kingdom formally removed itself—and Scotland—from the European Union and therefore from the EU's digital single market, which is estimated to be worth more than €400 billion per year. In the absence of any credible UK alternative, how can Scotland keep pace with and benefit from the EU's approach to digital services and innovation, so that Scotland can reap the economic rewards of closer involvement with the EU's direction of travel on digital matters in particular?

Angus Robertson: Missing the opportunities of access to the digital single market is just another example of the damage that has been caused by a Brexit that Scotland did not vote for. The European Parliament estimates that the potential gains of a digital single market could be in the region of €0.5 trillion per year, which would translate into potentially billions of pounds for our economy.

Our digital strategy for Scotland, which was published in 2021, highlights the need for a strong digital economy to help all businesses to become digital businesses, in Scotland's pursuit of becoming a vibrant, inclusive and outward-looking digital nation.

Bernat Klein Studio

8. Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what support it can provide to those who wish to protect and preserve the Bernat Klein studio in Selkirk. (S6O-04160)

The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): The Scottish Government delivers support for the historic environment through sponsorship of Historic Environment Scotland, the lead public body for the protection and preservation of historic sites in Scotland. The Bernat Klein studio in Selkirk is in private ownership and, as such, responsibility for the property's care and maintenance lies with its owner. However, it is worth noting that Historic Environment Scotland delivers around £14 million of grant funding each year to individuals, groups and organisations for projects that benefit the historic environment. Information on how to apply for funding can be found on its website.^f

Rachael Hamilton: The Bernat Klein studio near Selkirk was designed by one of Scotland's greatest modernist architects—Womersley—and has been described as

“a beacon of progressiveness for the Borders”.

Despite being on the buildings at risk register since 2002, it has now fallen into dereliction and disrepair and looks very sad and unloved. Does the minister recognise the value in preserving culturally significant buildings, and will he be prepared to meet local groups, the Preserving Womersley group, Historic Environment Scotland and others who wish to save the building and want to use it as a hub for the local community?

Angus Robertson: I commend Rachael Hamilton for standing up for a beacon of progressiveness in the Borders and for drawing attention to the Bernat Klein studio and its architectural, cultural and historical importance. It is absolutely right to note that it is the most celebrated work of Peter Womersley and was the

workplace of the world-class textile designer Bernat Klein. I will look very closely at any proposals that are made to protect and preserve the Bernat Klein studio, and I will be happy to do that together with Rachael Hamilton.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes portfolio questions on constitution, external affairs and culture, and parliamentary business. There will be a short pause before we move on to the next portfolio, to enable front-bench teams to change position, should they so wish.

Justice and Home Affairs

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The next portfolio is justice and home affairs. I ask members to be succinct in their questioning, and ministers in their responding, in order to allow as many members as possible to have an opportunity to ask questions.

As Mark Griffin is not here to ask question 1, I call question 2.

Operation Branchform

2. Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it has been made aware of the identity of the police officers investigating operation branchform, and, if so, when. (S6O-04162)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs (Angela Constance): That matter is subject to an on-going police investigation and, as such, it would not be appropriate to comment.

Craig Hoy: I thank the minister for that non-answer.

While the Crown Office determines whether to prosecute Peter Murrell and the police decide whether to charge Nicola Sturgeon, the public continue to scratch their heads in disbelief at the 1,273 days spent so far on operation branchform. We now know that 11 officers are engaged in the on-going investigation.

Separately, a recent freedom of information request asked the Scottish Government if and when it had found out the identities of the investigating officers and how it came to be made aware of those details. The request also asked what procedures were in place to ensure that meetings with those officers did not occur by accident. In response, the Government said that giving answers would “substantially prejudice the investigation”, which strongly suggests that the Government might well be aware of those facts.

Can the minister explain why revealing the specific date on which officers’ identities could have become known would risk prejudicing the police probe? If the Government has nothing to

hide, why would it not confirm how it might have secured the identities of the investigating officers—if, indeed, it is in receipt of them?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Before I ask the cabinet secretary to respond, I remind all members that there is a live investigation and that matters are therefore subject to the provisions of the Contempt of Court Act 1981. Members across the chamber should be careful and exercise due caution in what they say.

Angela Constance: With respect to both the Deputy Presiding Officer and the chamber, as Craig Hoy is well aware, I as justice secretary do not comment on, and am not involved in, live cases. I have nothing further to add.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: As no member has sought to ask a supplementary question, we will move to question 3.

Office of the Public Guardian Scotland (Support for Accessing the Scottish Courts and Tribunal Service)

3. Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what support is available from the Office of the Public Guardian for people accessing the Scottish Courts and Tribunals Service. (S6O-04163)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs (Angela Constance): The Office of the Public Guardian plays a key role in promoting awareness and understanding of the legal frameworks that are designed to protect adults with incapacity. Although it does not provide direct court access, its supportive and regulatory functions are key to maintaining trust and efficiency within the broader Scottish Courts and Tribunals Service framework. Individuals who seek support to access the courts can contact their local citizens advice bureau, law centre, solicitor, or third sector organisations that specialise in legal aid and advocacy services.

Clare Adamson: I want to highlight the case of a constituent. When a family applied for a guardianship order in 2014 for their adult son, they were granted a three-year award. However, on renewal in 2022, the court refused the extension, as the reports provided by other agencies were out of date by the time of the court appearance. The family have been in a circle of trying to get legal aid re-established and to access the courts again.

Therefore, will the minister provide an update on the timeframe for the legislative reforms to the Adults with Incapacity (Scotland) Act 2000? What steps can it take to ensure that agencies, including the courts, meet the timescales involved?

Angela Constance: A bill to update and modernise the Adults with Incapacity (Scotland) Act 2000 is expected to be introduced during the 2024-25 parliamentary year. A consultation on proposed amendments ran between July and October 2024, with analysis of the responses due to be published later this month.

I am sorry to hear of the delays experienced by Ms Adamson's constituent and family, and if she would like to provide further details to my office, I would be happy to look into the matter for her. However, delays to court hearings in respect of guardianship applications are not an issue that has been raised with me or my officials previously. As the member will be aware, the scheduling of court business is for the Scottish Courts and Tribunals Service. With support from the Scottish Government and our investment in resources, we have succeeded in significantly reducing the backlog in criminal courts. The civil case that the member spoke of has not previously been raised with me, but I would be delighted to look at it.

Scottish Prison Service (Crown Immunity)

4. Humza Yousaf (Glasgow) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what recent discussions it has had with the United Kingdom Government in relation to lifting Crown immunity under the Health and Safety at Work etc Act 1974 for the Scottish Prison Service. (S6O-04164)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs (Angela Constance): The Scottish Government has not had an occasion to discuss the matter with the UK Government since the new Administration was formed. I am due to write to the Secretary of State for Justice this month to schedule a bilateral meeting, and that will be one of several agenda items that I intend to set out for discussion. As Crown immunity remains a reserved matter for the UK Government, it is difficult for me to say more until I have had further discussions with it.

Humza Yousaf: I am pleased to hear that the cabinet secretary is writing to her UK counterpart to seek a meeting and that she will propose that that issue be on the agenda.

Let me from the outset acknowledge the incredibly difficult job that prison officers up and down the country do. The overwhelming majority do the job well. However, in any organisation, there will be individual and institutional failures, and on occasion, those failures will have a devastating impact.

Last year, I wrote to the then Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak, asking that he give serious consideration to lifting Crown immunity for the Scottish Prison Service for breaches of the Health and Safety at Work etc Act 1974. I was not given a

courtesy of a response. Can the cabinet secretary confirm that, during her meeting, she will urge the UK Government to seriously consider lifting Crown immunity to ensure that, if there are criminal failures in the Prison Service, those responsible are able to be held to account and are not protected by Crown immunity?

Angela Constance: Let me start by also acknowledging the role of prison officers. They undertake a difficult and challenging job in order to protect the public and to care for people who are quite often vulnerable.

As I mentioned in my answer, I am due to write to the Secretary of State for Justice this month to schedule a bilateral meeting. I know that the issue remains important for Mr Yousaf and others, and it is one of the items that I intend to raise during the meeting.

As Mr Yousaf will be aware, Crown immunity is not limited to the Scottish Prison Service. It is applicable to all Crown bodies across the UK, and a broader discussion with the UK Government will therefore be required.

Police Scotland

5. Bob Doris (Glasgow) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government when it last met with the chief constable of Police Scotland, and what issues were discussed. (S6O-04165)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs (Angela Constance): My most recent meeting with the chief constable was on 19 December 2024, when we discussed Police Scotland's three-year business plan, with notable progress made across a number of areas, including body-worn video and the police budget. I am pleased to report that the latter was welcomed by the chief constable, who stated that it would allow Police Scotland to continue to deliver against its three-year plan on police officer and staff pay. I am also pleased to inform the chamber that agreement has now been reached in respect of the police staff pay award.

Bob Doris: I welcome that positive news.

When the cabinet secretary next meets the chief constable, she might wish to indicate that MSPs such as myself wish to see greater support for Police Scotland in policing the dangerous misuse and often illegal use of off-road vehicles and e-bikes. Councillor Allan Gow and I have an upcoming meeting with the Scottish Government, Police Scotland and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities on related issues, given our public safety concerns. Given that many e-bikes, scooters and quad bikes will have been purchased as gifts at Christmas and will generally become increasingly common across our communities, does the cabinet secretary agree that promoting

the responsible and legal use of such vehicles with related public awareness and education campaigns is worthy of consideration?

Angela Constance: Mr Doris's points are apposite and well made, particularly those in relation to the festive period. I assure him and other members that the Scottish Government will continue to fully support Police Scotland and other relevant partners in dealing with the misuse of such vehicles.

Before Christmas, Police Scotland issued public communications via its website, reminding people to consider the legal implications when purchasing an electric scooter or e-bike. Its message urged people to be cautious when buying electric bikes or e-scooters, and it reminded the public that some models may not be permitted for use on public roads and that anyone found riding a non-compliant e-bike or e-scooter on a public road is likely to have it seized by officers, at significant cost to the owner.

I am also aware that Minister Siobhian Brown and Minister Jim Fairlie, will, along with representatives of Police Scotland, be meeting Mr Doris, who, with other MSP colleagues, has been pursuing the issue diligently.

Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland) (Lab): Five young activists are currently serving sentences in Scottish prisons for taking part in a non-violent Palestine solidarity protest at the Thales weapons factory in Glasgow. It is rare for activists to be imprisoned in Scotland, and a different policing approach seems to have been taken to protests at the Leonardo weapons factory in Edinburgh.

What discussions has the Scottish Government had with the chief constable of Police Scotland regarding the policing of protests at weapons factories, and on any apparent discrepancies in the approach to them? Does the minister recognise the right to protest and its importance in a democratic society?

Angela Constance: I cannot and will not comment on the independent decisions made on sentencing by our independent courts, but I reassure the member that I regularly discuss issues in and around the policing of protests with the chief constable and other police partners. We do indeed preserve and respect the right to peaceful protest.

The approach that Police Scotland successfully undertakes is to engage, educate and encourage, and it will pursue all those measures prior to taking any necessary enforcement action. I am very proud that Police Scotland works diligently, day in, day out, to build constructive relationships with all our communities, including people exercising their right to peaceful protest.

Rape Victims (Legal Representation)

6. **Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it is giving consideration to a pilot scheme on independent legal representation for rape victims. (S6O-04166)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs (Angela Constance): The Parliament is aware that I am committed to improving the experience of victims of sexual offences in their interaction with our justice system. That lies at the very heart of the provisions in the Victims, Witnesses, and Justice Reform (Scotland) Bill. The bill will enable publicly funded independent legal representation for complainants when applications to lead evidence of their sexual history and/or their character are made in sexual offence cases.

The bill does not currently include a power for ministers to go beyond that. However, I am aware of Ms Clark's amendment to the bill, which I will carefully consider, and I will seek to meet her to discuss that directly.

Katy Clark: I am grateful to the cabinet secretary for her offer to meet. As she knows, many rape victims describe their experience of the justice system as retraumatising, intimidating and disempowering. Over recent decades, many other countries have introduced far greater advice and representation for victims, including rape victims. Does the cabinet secretary agree with organisations such as Rape Crisis Scotland that there is a strong case for a further extension of legal advice to victims of rape to empower those survivors?

Angela Constance: I start by saying that complainants and victims having fundamental trust and confidence in the system is crucial to their coming forward and seeking justice. I very much recognise Ms Clark's commentary on the retraumatisation that many victims have powerfully given personal testimony on, particularly in representations to the Criminal Justice Committee.

I very much welcomed the committee's conclusion in its stage 1 report on the Victims, Witnesses, and Justice Reform (Scotland) Bill that independent legal representation should not be extended beyond section 275 applications. The rationale was that focusing ILR on section 275 applications would provide a base for evaluation of its effectiveness, use and cost and whether further reform is required. That is not to say that we cannot look at the further application of ILR at a later point, where evidence would support that approach.

Notwithstanding that, I am happy to discuss with Ms Clark and other members the shape of the bill in the round, because how it hangs together as an overall package is of crucial importance. I will, in

fairness and in the spirit of co-operation, discuss with Ms Clark a specific amendment in that regard.

Reoffending Rate

7. Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to reduce the reoffending rate. (S6O-04167)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs (Angela Constance): We know that community-based interventions can be more effective in reducing reoffending and assisting with rehabilitation and short-term custodial sentences, leading to fewer victims and safer communities. That is why we are focused on shifting the balance from custody to justice in the community, and we plan to invest approximately £159 million in community justice services in 2025-26 to support that. That includes an additional £11 million, which takes our total new investment over two years to £25 million, supporting a range of community justice services, including diversion from prosecution, alternatives to remand, community sentencing and throughcare services.

Richard Leonard: I thank the cabinet secretary for that answer. It was Angela Davis who said:

“Prisons do not disappear social problems, they disappear human beings.”

But it is worse—prisons, for most people sent there, are not correctional; they have the opposite effect. Not only do they cost 20 times more than community sentencing; the reconviction rate is double. For all but the more serious crimes, prison does not make society safer at all—it manufactures criminality. So why do we continue to have one of the biggest prison populations in the whole of western Europe, and why is the Scottish Government planning to cut the core budget for Community Justice Scotland in the next financial year?

Angela Constance: I have great respect for, and sympathy with, the overall tone and tenor of Mr Leonard’s question. I know that he is a powerful advocate for social justice and reform, and he is right to say that prison should be used for those who present the greatest risk to members of the public and that our prisons should also have a crucial role in reintegration and rehabilitation.

Why does Scotland have one of the biggest prison populations in western Europe? I am not sure that I could answer that question in 30 seconds, but it gets to the fundamental core of the issue. In all my endeavours over the past year or so to reduce the prison population, I am on record as saying, time and time again, that the prison population is too high and that we need to answer, at a fundamental level, the question of why we have one of the highest prison populations in the

western world when we are one of the safest countries in western Europe, and indeed in the world.

In all my endeavours, I want to shift from more emotive and knee-jerk reactions to reactions and interventions that are, first and foremost, based on evidence of what works, and what works to keep our communities safer. Community justice is key to that, and I am very pleased that this former social worker continues to increase investment in community justice.

Sharon Dowe (South Scotland) (Con): Last summer, 12 per cent of prisoners who were freed as part of the Scottish National Party’s early release scheme ended up reoffending, with some breaking the law within hours of being released. With another wave of early releases expected in February, victims of crime will be concerned that we may see high rates of reoffending again. What is the Scottish Government doing to improve public confidence that, when someone reoffends, their criminal actions will have consequences?

Angela Constance: The public have confidence when our criminal justice interventions protect the public. Yes, those interventions punish, but they also succeed in reintegrating and rehabilitating prisoners and those who come into contact with the justice service. We know that people are concerned about reoffending rates, but when we look at the rates for short custodial sentences and the rates for community justice, we see that community justice has better outcomes and lower reconviction rates. It is not just the right thing to do to shift that balance to community justice; it is also the smart thing to do, and it is the safer thing to do for our communities.

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): Can the cabinet secretary expand on how the investment in community justice services that is contained in the proposed Scottish budget will continue the Scottish Government’s shift to the use of more community-based sentences and help to reduce reoffending?

Angela Constance: The 2025-26 budget further increases the overall community justice budget by £11 million, which builds on the £14 million of additional funding that was committed for this financial year. As I said, that will bring our total budget to £159 million. That investment will support justice social work services across Scotland to build capacity and to deliver a range of community justice services, including, crucially, alternatives to remand and community services. That uplift demonstrates our commitment to shifting the balance from custody to justice in the community and follows the evidence on what works to reduce reoffending.

One example of the progress that has been made is that bail supervision cases are at their highest level of the past decade, and the use of electronic monitoring as a condition of bail has increased by 51 per cent to 1,140 individuals in orders that were imposed across Scotland in 2023-24.

Court Backlogs

8. Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): Happy new year.

To ask the Scottish Government whether it has conducted an assessment of the potential impact of the reported proposed budget reduction for the Scottish Courts and Tribunals Service on its ability to reduce any court backlogs. (S6O-04168)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs (Angela Constance): The Scottish Courts and Tribunals Service budget is subject to adjustment each year and direct comparison with published figures does not provide a true reflection of the position. The 2025-26 allocation to the service is £177 million. In addition, it receives recovery, renewal and transformation funding of £20.3 million, which will be subject to adjustment in-year. That provides a minimum of £197.3 million, which is an increase compared to the 2023-24 and 2024-25 figures.

Jeremy Balfour: During the pandemic, the closure of courts meant that a large backlog of cases built up, including cases involving the most serious crimes. Back in March 2021, the Scottish Courts and Tribunals Service forecast that the backlog of cases involving the most serious crimes would be cleared by March this year, which is in just two months' time. However, that forecast has now been revisited and a much less ambitious goal has been set out. Given that the Scottish Government's budget appears to show that there is a cut in the cash settlement for our court service, can the cabinet secretary confirm that any hope of meeting the court service's original targets for clearing trial backlogs is over and that people will have to wait longer for justice?

Angela Constance: I reiterate that funding to the Scottish Courts and Tribunals Service has not been cut. I outlined the figures in my previous answer to Mr Balfour. It is important that that crucial information is not misunderstood or misrepresented.

We know that demand on our court system, and on the High Court in particular, is increasing, due to the successful actions of the Crown Office and prosecutors. We have always been transparent about the scheduling and revising of planned timescales, as has the court and tribunal system. However, I am pleased to say that, as a result of recovery funding that has been allocated to tackle

backlogs, significant progress has been made in reducing those timescales. In fact, the number of scheduled trials outstanding has fallen by more than 50 per cent since January 2022.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): Today, Jeremy Balfour seeks additional resources for the courts. In the last debate before Christmas, Pam Gosal sought more money to fix potholes. Last week, Murdo Fraser demanded more electric vehicle charging points. Given that none of those uncostered suggestions was even mentioned in December's Tory budget debate, and that, on Monday, Russell Findlay again called for tax cuts, does the cabinet secretary agree that the Tories have not a shred of credibility when it comes to Scotland's finances?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call the cabinet secretary to answer with regard to matters relating to her portfolio responsibilities.

Angela Constance: Of course, Presiding Officer. What is relevant to the justice portfolio is that the First Minister has continued to emphasise that he wants to maximise agreement with all parties. Of course, there always needs to be a sharp check with reality with regard to what resources are available and, indeed, what powers are available to this Parliament. However, I am pleased that, for the second year, we have increased the justice allocation in the budget. If passed, the budget will mean an investment of almost £4.2 billion in justice, which is an increase of £398 million. That increased budget will support the provision of high-quality public services, including police, fire, courts and prisons, continuing to keep our communities safe.

Secure Accommodation Capacity

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a statement by Natalie Don-Innes on Scotland's secure accommodation capacity. The minister will take questions at the end of her statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

14:52

The Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise (Natalie Don-Innes): I am grateful for the opportunity to address the important issue of Scotland's secure accommodation capacity. As Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise, I recognise and value the critically important role that secure care services play in safeguarding our most vulnerable children.

Members will be aware that, in passing the Children (Care and Justice) (Scotland) Bill in April, Parliament voted to enshrine in law age-appropriate care and justice for vulnerable young people across the country. As part of wider work to further advance our commitment to children's rights and embed the Promise, the bill—which became an act on 4 June 2024—importantly ensures that children are kept out of prison and young offenders institutions, with secure accommodation being the normal place of detention instead.

Secure accommodation services are the most intensive, restrictive and specialised form of childcare in Scotland. They are highly regulated and high-cost services. Secure accommodation is designed to meet the needs of a small number of children who need to be deprived of their liberty to keep them or others safe. It is therefore imperative that we have sufficient secure provision to meet Scotland's needs.

The number of vacant places in secure accommodation fluctuates and is monitored closely. This morning, there were three places available in secure accommodation in Scotland. That is not unprecedented, because the needs of children in secure care can be complex, often requiring multiple interventions such as the use of multiple secure accommodation beds when a child's needs are too complex to be managed within a single space. Capacity can therefore shift daily. Although that provides only a small margin—smaller than we would wish—it is vital that members recognise that redundant overprovision would run contrary to keeping the Promise and would be intolerably expensive.

There are, therefore, challenges within and around secure care, and I am here today to be transparent to Parliament and assure members that the Government is fully committed to taking

action to address them. In this statement, I will describe how we are doing so.

Secure accommodation is not just about providing a safe place to stay. Providers work to understand and address the root causes of each young person's behaviour and needs and they provide each child with the specialist and tailored care and support that they need to promote positive outcomes.

Secure accommodation is a demand-led service that is provided by four independent charitable organisations in Scotland. It is highly regulated and is subject to regular inspections by both the Care Inspectorate and His Majesty's Inspectorate of Education.

As I said at the outset of my statement, the Children (Care and Justice) (Scotland) Act 2024 saw Scotland take a major step forward to keep the Promise. Prior to those reforms, children who were in conflict with the law could be placed in young offenders institutions. Careful planning, additional resourcing and intensive preparations meant that we could introduce the reforms less than three months after the bill received royal assent. Implementing the reforms at pace has involved an enormous collaborative effort, and it is with thanks to our secure care providers and our wider partners that I can proudly say that Scotland is a country that does not imprison children.

However, the profile of and focus on this landmark legislation has brought into sharp focus some long-standing challenges around the provision of and access to secure care, and those issues need to be addressed to enable sustainability and resilience, particularly as demand fluctuates in these early post-commencement stages.

I will set out the actions that the Government is taking, but first I will provide some context. Today's tight occupancy position is not unprecedented. There has always been pressure on secure care capacity due to the need for high occupancy levels to maintain viability. I reassure Parliament and the public that the Scottish Government is already addressing capacity. In recent years, we have seen a steady overall decline in the number of secure care placements that are required in Scotland, from an average of 74 in 2021-22 to 59 in 2022-23. That reduction in demand has opened up the opportunity and capacity for reforms. However, in recent months, the position has been affected by the small increase in remand and sentenced children being placed in secure accommodation rather than in young offenders institutions. In 2022-23, on average, there were nine under-18s in Young Offenders Institution Polmont.

St Mary's Kenmure in Bishopbriggs was served an improvement notice by the Care Inspectorate following its inspection in October, which triggered a pause on new admissions. I was deeply concerned about that development, and the Government has been kept updated regularly on the progress of the Care Inspectorate's review. It is right that admissions were paused while work was undertaken to make the required improvements. That pause has displaced demand to the other three centres and reduced the overall availability of beds across Scotland over recent months.

Following the Care Inspectorate's visit to the centre on 18 December, it was satisfied that progress had been made and it agreed to lift the pause on new admissions. Some areas still require further work, so the Care Inspectorate has agreed that the maximum capacity should be capped at 12. That pre-Christmas progress is welcome, and it has increased the capacity in the secure estate by four beds. It is my hope that St Mary's will continue to make the required improvements, as set out by the Care Inspectorate, as soon as possible.

Of course, secure capacity is not just about numbers of vacant beds; it is also about quality. We must ensure that children and young people receive the highest quality of care in environments where their welfare is prioritised. A secure capacity contingency plan has recently been developed in collaboration with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, Social Work Scotland and the Care Inspectorate. The plan is designed not only to manage the current challenges but to strengthen our secure accommodation system for the future.

On short-term actions, one of the immediate actions has been for the Care Inspectorate to update the secure care admission guidance to provide greater flexibility in respect of the protocol for use of the four emergency bedrooms. That allows secure care providers the flexibility to make decisions on the use of an emergency bedroom to provide relief in emergency situations when its use is required for a live situation or to allow a child to be safely cared for temporarily until a place becomes available.

We are working closely with secure care providers and other stakeholders to establish a clear agreement on the minimum vacant secure care capacity requirements for Scotland overall at any given time. We are exploring the potential urgent establishment of a new national contingency resource and consideration is being given to opportunities to repurpose some elements of the existing secure accommodation estate on at least one site, which would provide additional

capacity in the system. We will update Parliament on that as soon as possible.

We are in the process of finalising a memorandum of understanding with centres and other partners. That will set out a clear codification of responsibilities, as well as a robust protocol for managing issues relating to the most complex secure care placements.

As members know, secure care should only ever be used when it is absolutely necessary. Contingency actions, which are focusing on high-intensity wraparound services, include identifying and enabling effective alternatives to secure care, such as health interventions that focus on diverting individuals with certain mental health needs into appropriate settings.

The Scottish Government is making available funding of up to £7 million to cover the placements of sentenced and remanded children in this financial year, and the Government has committed to maintaining that funding in 2025-26. That is, of course, subject to parliamentary approval this year.

The Government also continues to pay for up to 16 beds across the secure estate. That is to maintain capacity for children who are placed by the courts and to provide a level of financial security to secure providers. That intervention has been effective in driving down reliance on cross-border placements, the number of which is down to 10 from 19 last January. In addition, last summer, £500,000 of funding was offered to secure providers to support their preparations for the movement of children from young offenders institutions to secure care.

In the medium to long term, we are committed to developing a more resilient and responsive system of secure care provision, capacity preservation and placement management. We commissioned the University of Strathclyde's Children and Young People's Centre for Justice to consider the future needs of children in or on the edges of secure care, which resulted in the publication of the "Reimagining Secure Care" report on 27 September. Our aim is to provide a more detailed response to the report in late spring. To do that, we are engaging with a range of stakeholders, including by holding a round-table discussion with the chairs and heads of all four secure care centres, which took place in late November.

Meanwhile, focused fortnightly post-commencement meetings are held with care and justice partners, and regular contingency action meetings continue with COSLA, Social Work Scotland and the Care Inspectorate.

We will continue our work to keep the Promise and ensure that our care and justice services for children are informed by the views, rights and

needs of our children. I look forward to setting out a vision for the proposed Promise bill in the weeks ahead and to working with colleagues across the chamber to ensure that we uphold the promise that each of us made five years ago.

I hope that today's statement has provided reassurance to members that secure care capacity and delivery are of the utmost importance to the Scottish Government. We continually monitor capacity and have structures in place to ensure that demand is met. However, I hope that it is clear from what I have said that we are committed to making the system more adaptable and robust in the year ahead.

Given that this is a complex and shifting issue, I am aware that members will have further questions or will want to seek clarifications, and I am happy to answer their questions now.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The minister will now take questions on the issues that were raised in her statement. I intend to allow about 20 minutes for that, after which we will need to move on to the next item of business.

Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I wish a happy new year to everyone in the chamber.

I thank the minister for advance sight of her statement. During the passage of the Children (Care and Justice) (Scotland) Bill last year, my party consistently warned the Scottish Government that the capacity of Scotland's secure accommodation provision would be a significant barrier to delivering the bill's aims. In 2022-23, the number of admissions to secure care increased by 3 per cent. Unfortunately, the Government appears to have fallen at the first hurdle, and the provision of sufficient secure accommodation is now in question. Although the secure capacity contingency plan is welcome, it comes with huge additional challenges.

First, can the minister confirm that greater flexibility in respect of use of the four emergency bedrooms in the secure accommodation centres will be sufficient to prioritise welfare for all? Secondly, I appreciate that there needs to be action in the medium to long term to create a more resilient system, but what preventative support is being provided to those leaving secure accommodation, the wider community and their families to prevent a return to secure accommodation in the future?

Finally, one of the Scottish Conservatives' key concerns was the need for adequate support for key agencies. That is still a concern, so what is the minister doing to rectify that issue?

Natalie Don-Innes: I thank Roz McCall for her questions—there was a lot in there.

I do not necessarily agree with the suggestion that we have fallen at the first hurdle. With regard to the Children (Care and Justice) (Scotland) Act 2024, I stood here and said that we will continue to ensure that capacity is available. A lot of planning was undertaken and a lot of safeguards were put in place before the provisions were commenced. In addition, a lot of engagement took place between the secure accommodation providers, the Scottish Prison Service, Scottish Courts, Police Scotland and Social Work Scotland. We were ready for the provisions to be enacted.

As I said, I was deeply disappointed by the situation at St Mary's Kenmure, which has exacerbated things, but I hope that, through my statement, I have given assurances about the actions that were taken to resolve the matter.

On the standards that children and young people can expect after secure care, those are contained in the secure care pathway and standards. All young people can expect those standards to be applied.

The member also asked about the four beds. I do not expect that provision to solve all the problems, but, as I said in my statement, that is one of a number of measures that we are taking to try to solve the issues with capacity. If there is anything that I have not touched on, I am more than happy to follow up with the member afterwards.

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): I thank the minister for her statement, which was requested before Christmas recess, along with an assurance that there was not going to be a capacity issue over the Christmas recess period. During that time, on average, only one bed was available. The minister talked about three beds being available this morning. In fact, only two beds are available at the moment, and no emergency beds are available, so the spare capacity is only two beds.

There is great concern that young people who are placed in secure accommodation on a care and welfare basis are possibly being rushed out before it is safe in order to create space and to facilitate the flexibility that is being talked about. Can the Scottish Government reassure the people of Scotland and, more important, the young people who are caught up in the system that no one, on any occasion, is rushed out of secure accommodation to make provision for a more serious case as perceived by those who are deciding who goes where?

Natalie Don-Innes: I can absolutely give that assurance. Given the situation before Christmas, the matter received a lot of attention. The problem has been alleviated, and, as I said in my

statement, three beds are available across Scotland.

As I also said in my statement, the shift in capacity in secure care can happen daily. The heads of secure care centres and other organisations engage with each other and discuss the best interests of the child. I reassure Mr Whitfield that what he suggested is not the case. The best interests of the child are at the heart of every decision that is made in relation to placements in secure care.

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): How does the situation in Scotland compare with the situation elsewhere in the United Kingdom?

Natalie Don-Innes: The issue is faced across the UK. It is well known that placements across the rest of the UK are volatile, with children often placed in secure accommodation in Scotland due to the limited availability of placements in England and Wales. I understand that the UK Government is currently working on that, through its recently introduced Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill. Officials are in regular contact with UK Government counterparts, and that engagement will continue.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): It is good that the Care Inspectorate is satisfied with the improvements at St Mary's Kenmure, but the original report highlighted "dangerously low" levels of staffing. What is the minister doing to ensure that staffing levels are and remain appropriate across the whole estate?

Natalie Don-Innes: As I laid out in my statement, and referred to in response to other members' questions, we regularly engage with St Mary's Kenmure. Engagement with St Mary's continued over Christmas and prior to the period when the restrictions were in place.

As I said, the Care Inspectorate is satisfied that St Mary's has made the appropriate improvements, which allows the provision of additional capacity and enables children to be placed there. I will continue my engagement with St Mary's and the other centres to ensure that staffing and any other problems that they might raise with me are monitored and actioned.

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): I welcome the minister's statement and the reassurance about the current capacity in the system. What plans does the Government have to increase the capacity of secure accommodation, and how does the Government plan to meet increasing demand in future?

Natalie Don-Innes: As I set out in my statement, through a new secure care contingency plan, which was developed in collaboration with

COSLA, Social Work Scotland and the Care Inspectorate, we are tackling the issue head on. The contingency plan is designed not just to manage the current challenges but to strengthen the secure care system and accommodation for the future.

In my statement, I set out some of the immediate actions that we will take in the coming weeks and months. They include the actions that we are taking collaboratively with partners to increase accommodation capacity by, for example, exploring opportunities such as the establishment of a new national resource. We are also considering effective alternatives to secure care, such as health interventions, to ensure that children and young people receive the care that they need in the setting that most appropriately suits those needs. We are laying the groundwork for a resilient and reimagined future for secure care and, equally, for the children who will rely on that.

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): It is concerning that the minister said in her statement that the Government has not yet established

"a clear agreement on the minimum vacant secure care capacity requirements for Scotland ... at any given time".

Given that there has been a change in the law, which many have welcomed, I ask the minister to be clear on what will happen to a young offender who previously would have been in Polmont if, on the day of sentencing, they are required to go to a secure place but none is available. Can I have the minister's cast-iron assurance that that young offender will remain in Scotland? What will happen in that situation?

Natalie Don-Innes: Ms McNeill is dealing with hypotheticals. Before Christmas, we were in a situation in which we had one place in secure care. I agreed that that was extremely concerning, and I have laid out in my statement the actions that were taken to ensure that that situation did not continue. We have increased capacity. If the situation at St Mary's Kenmure continues to improve, the capacity will continue to increase. In the year-to-year data, we have seen reductions in the numbers in secure care, regardless of the changes in legislation in the past year.

I do not want to deal with hypotheticals; I want to deal with the situation as it is now, and I have laid out the action that the Scottish Government is taking in relation to that.

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): Many children and young people in secure care are vulnerable and have faced significant adverse childhood experiences. What is the Government doing to ensure that local authorities can provide intense alternative-to-care support services that focus on keeping young

people out of secure care, so that it is only ever used as a last resort?

Natalie Don-Innes: Obviously, the quality of secure care is extremely important, but, in line with our work to keep the Promise, we want to use alternatives for children and young people and, when possible, divert them to alternatives to secure care. The Scottish Government takes a rights-based approach to youth justice, which is reflected in our investment in services and initiatives that are aimed at addressing the underlying causes of offending and at supporting young people in the community. That is done through funding streams such as the cashback for communities fund and the whole-family wellbeing fund. I have witnessed how transformational whole-family interventions have been for families, and I know about the difference that they undoubtedly make in the long term.

The Scottish Government also provides ring-fenced funding to all local authorities through the section 27 grant allocation, which includes funding for alternatives such as diversion from prosecution, bail supervision and electronic monitoring. Local authorities also have their own initiatives not only to divert but to prevent, and I am always willing to hear more about any positive initiatives that are going on at the local level.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): I want to press the minister further on Martin Whitfield's point. There is anxiety that those who might need a secure place on care or welfare grounds might be denied that place because of insufficient capacity. What independent processes are there, perhaps involving the Care Inspectorate, to ensure that we have a proper assessment of all the individual cases and that there is capacity for those who need it?

Natalie Don-Innes: We have our secure care pathways and standards, which relate to what a child or young person should expect before, during or after they are in secure care. If somebody is there on welfare grounds, that would be relevant to them.

I understand what Mr Rennie and Mr Whitfield are saying. They are scared that somebody who requires to be deprived of their liberty would not be, perhaps because of more people being in secure care on offence grounds. As I have said, however, there are regular conversations between the Government, partners and heads of secure care to ensure that a situation such as that does not happen. I am positive that, if there were any moves or discussions around that, I would hear about it, and that is absolutely not the case. The interests of the child are absolutely at the heart of everything that we are doing, and I would be very disappointed if that was not the case.

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): I welcome the work that the Government did through the Children (Care and Justice) (Scotland) Bill, particularly in ensuring that children and young people are not placed in adult institutions. Can the minister tell us more about the support that the Government has provided to secure providers to help them to plan for children moving from young offenders institutions into secure care?

Natalie Don-Innes: We wanted to prioritise that prior to the provisions in the bill being implemented. I felt that that was a very important issue that came out of the bill process. We moved at pace to ensure that secure care providers were supported to be able to take children from young offenders institutions.

I have spoken about the regular engagement that took place, and funding was provided by the Scottish Government to secure care providers to make any necessary changes or adaptations that were required. I will continue to listen to secure care providers about any concerns that they may have in the light of the move that has been made.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: It would be helpful, minister, if you addressed your remarks towards the microphone, although I know that it is counterintuitive when speaking to somebody behind you.

Natalie Don-Innes: Apologies, Presiding Officer.

Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con): A stage 3 amendment to the Children (Care and Justice) (Scotland) Bill from my colleague Sue Webber, which was agreed to by the Parliament, ensures that a child is not placed in the same residential establishment as another child who has committed an offence against them or whose behaviour poses a serious risk to their health, safety or development. In the light of the minister's statement, can she confirm whether that vital safeguarding measure is being properly enforced and what action the Scottish Government is taking to ensure that it is applied in practice to protect vulnerable children?

Unfortunately, some children need to be in secure care not only for their safety but for the safety of the public. I ask the minister again to clarify what will happen if and when capacity is reached.

Natalie Don-Innes: The member has touched on amendments made to the Children (Care and Justice) (Scotland) Bill at stage 3. The member will be aware that the Government supported those amendments, of which I am still very supportive.

I have spoken about that in referring to the discussions that take place prior to a child's placement to ensure that the centre in which they

are placed is adequate for their needs and for those of the children around them. Those conversations will continue to be had about any coming placements, and I will continue to monitor that. I continue to ask my officials about any issues around that, and I have been assured that there are none.

I am sorry, but I missed the second point of the member's question. If she could follow that up with me in writing, I would be grateful.

Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): Regarding young people who are in secure care as a last resort, I would be grateful if the minister could say more about what the Scottish Government is doing to support young people with mental health needs, which may not ordinarily be appropriately met in secure care. What other support is being provided or could be provided that they may need or benefit from?

Natalie Don-Innes: A number of initiatives are relevant to that. The Government is developing the national secure adolescent in-patient service for Scotland, known as Foxgrove, which was commissioned by the national services division. It will be a medium-secure in-patient service for children and young people aged from 12 to 18 years with appropriate forensic child and adolescent mental health services—CAMHS—needs. It will open in late 2025 and will provide four beds for young people who require care in an in-patient setting with medium levels of security.

We are also providing just under £3.5 million across the west, east and north of Scotland to support the planning and development of regional elements of the CAMHS national service specification. That includes the development of a four-bed adolescent intensive psychiatric care unit in the west of Scotland and forensic CAMHS and intensive home treatment CAMHS services and pathways.

The Scottish Government is also providing funding of up to £380,000 to the Kibble-based interventions for vulnerable youth service, which is a specialist psychological and social work service that offers therapeutic forensic mental health risk assessment and management support to children and young people who present a risk of harm to others.

I could go on—there is more that we are doing that I could expand on. I am happy to give Ben Macpherson more information in writing, but I emphasise that mental health is a priority.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, minister. That concludes this item of business.

Martin Whitfield: On a point of order, Deputy Presiding Officer. I seek your guidance on how to place on record that the minister's statement that,

this morning, there were three places available in secure accommodation in Scotland was factually incorrect and that, at 10.46 this morning, there were only two places in independent secure centres listed as being available.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I think that you have answered your own question, Mr Whitfield: you have put that on the record. It is not a point of order.

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

National Performance Framework (National Outcomes)

15:22

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-15708, in the name of Kenneth Gibson, on behalf of the Finance and Public Administration Committee, on the national performance framework—review of national outcomes. I invite members who wish to participate in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons.

15:22

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): I am pleased to speak on behalf of the Finance and Public Administration Committee in this debate on the Scottish Government's proposed national outcomes.

We launched a joint committee inquiry into the proposed national outcomes last May, and I thank all those who took the time to speak with us and provide written evidence. Their input was invaluable in shaping our findings and recommendations.

I particularly thank the committee's former clerk, Jane Williams, who was with the Scottish Parliament since 1999 and who retired at Christmas to head off to east Asia and the antipodes. For her sins, Jane seemingly lived and breathed the national performance framework.

The review was a shared endeavour, with multiple committees undertaking scrutiny of the national outcomes that were relevant to their remits. Our focus was on the overall review, implementation and cross-cutting issues, building on evidence that was previously received as part of our 2022 inquiry. Taken together, the Finance and Public Administration Committee's report, the written views of other committees and today's debate constitute the Parliament's consultation response to the Scottish Government's second statutory review of the national outcomes.

As the report shows, the national performance framework continues to be an important agreed vision of the type of place that Scotland should aspire to be. However, there is room for improvement, and our report makes several recommendations in relation to the national outcomes themselves, as well as on implementation and delivery.

Our scrutiny reflected on the proposed change in the framework's purpose, which is now

"To improve the wellbeing of people living in Scotland now and in the future".

Although we acknowledge the rationale that underpins the change, the updated purpose calls into question whether the title of the national performance framework remains accurate and relevant, particularly given that the review document itself describes the framework as "Scotland's Wellbeing Framework". We heard from some witnesses that clarity around the framework's purpose could be better achieved by including a reference to wellbeing in its name. We therefore recommend that, as part of its future consultation plans, the Scottish Government seeks stakeholders' views on updating the framework's name to ensure that its title accurately reflects its purpose. A rebrand is essential, and I hope that the Deputy First Minister will respond on that issue directly in her speech.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind): Does Kenneth Gibson accept that there is a risk that, if the name of the NPF were changed, it might be even more confusing and its profile might be lowered?

Kenneth Gibson: One could argue that changing the NPF's name would boost its profile, because there would be heightened discussion on the issues that we are discussing this afternoon.

The Scottish Government has proposed increasing the number of national outcomes from 11 to 13, with revisions made to all but the national outcome that relates to culture. There is a balance to be struck when deciding how many national outcomes to take forward. As witnesses told us, too few national outcomes could result in the framework becoming

"too high level to focus decision-making",

whereas too many could lead to

"increased complexity in managing the conflicts of interest ... that arise between them."

Regardless of the number of national outcomes, it is clear to the committee that it is important how they interlink, particularly considering the potential trade-offs when using the national outcomes to shape policy and spending decisions.

During evidence taking, we heard that care should be taken to ensure that actions to progress one outcome do not unintentionally impact adversely on another outcome. We have therefore asked the Scottish Government to set out in its implementation plan how the complexities and potential trade-offs will be managed. The committee also seeks clarification on how the proposed new definitions of each national outcome will be used in ministerial decision making.

Given the interactions and intersectionality that exist between the proposed national outcomes, we welcome the Scottish Government's decision to undertake a thematic gender review of the national performance framework. However, we were disappointed that the findings of that review were not published alongside the proposed national outcomes, which meant that the review could not be considered by witnesses or be fully scrutinised by parliamentary committees.

The national indicators are intended to provide a transparent means of tracking the progress that is being made in delivering the national outcomes and the framework's vision. Our 2022 inquiry into the national performance framework, almost five years after the previous review in 2018, reported concerns that many of the 81 national indicators still had no data. That remains an issue of concern. As of August 2024, data remained unavailable for 11 of the 81 national indicators that were agreed as part of the 2018 review of the national outcomes. That is deeply disappointing, to say the least. We therefore reiterate our earlier recommendation that the development of national indicators should not be left until the end of the process.

Over the course of our evidence taking, witnesses expressed disappointment that the Scottish Government had not committed to consulting more widely on specific indicators. We heard concerns about a lack of transparency in relation to the development of the national indicators. One witness told us that the Government's approach leads to a perception that

"the Government is not only marking its own homework but setting the questions."—[*Official Report, Finance and Public Administration Committee*, 1 October 2024; c 62.]

To address the gaps in the data, we recommend that the Scottish Government should now consult relevant sectors on its proposed national indicators and agree how to approach data gaps. For future reviews, we urge the Scottish ministers to publish the proposed draft indicators alongside the proposed national outcomes to ensure greater transparency, consultation and scrutiny.

As members will be aware, the national outcomes are broadly based on the United Nations sustainable development goals. Witnesses suggested ways in which the national outcomes could be better aligned with those goals. For example, the national outcome of reducing poverty lacks the ambition of the comparable sustainable development goal of ending poverty. Our report therefore recommends that that outcome should be amended to address the apparent mismatch.

We also urge the Scottish ministers to consider how progress towards the sustainable development goals can be more transparently

evidenced through the NPF, especially in areas such as gender equality, for which there is no dedicated national outcome.

In closing the debate for the committee, the deputy convener will cover other key aspects of the committee's report. I look forward to hearing from other members about their committees' scrutiny of the proposed national outcomes.

I move,

That the Parliament notes the findings and recommendations in the Finance and Public Administration Committee's 10th Report, 2024 (Session 6), *Report on the National Performance Framework: Review of National Outcomes* (SP Paper 685), and the responses from other committees, as referenced in annexe B to the report.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Finlay Carson to speak on behalf of the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee.

15:28

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): I welcome the opportunity to speak on behalf of the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee and to set out our scrutiny of the proposed new national outcomes.

Rural and island affairs relate to most of the 13 proposed national outcomes in one way or another. Therefore, the key focus of our work was to assess whether the proposed new national outcomes were sufficiently rural proofed and would serve the interests of communities across rural Scotland.

The committee participated in the Finance and Public Administration Committee's joint call for views on the proposed national outcomes before the summer, and it considered the responses to that consultation. As part of our pre-budget scrutiny, we also sought written evidence on whether last year's budget allocations contributed to achieving the existing national outcomes and how, if necessary, budget allocations and the national outcomes could be better aligned.

We concluded our scrutiny in September by taking evidence from the Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Gaelic. I also questioned the First Minister on the matter at the Conveners' Group a week later. On behalf of the committee, I thank everybody who shared their views with us.

Throughout our evidence gathering, we heard clearly that, across a variety of policy areas, people who live in rural Scotland have specific geographical challenges and opportunities that require specific and tailored policy responses from the Scottish Government. We saw the review of the national outcomes as an important opportunity for ensuring that Scotland's public sector landscape can support rural and island

communities and determine what further measures are necessary.

I will talk about three specific issues that were highlighted to us. The first was digital connectivity and inclusivity. Stakeholders told us about the challenges that some people in rural areas face compared with more urban parts of the country when it comes to accessing good-quality digital connections, technology and training. We also heard how improvements in that area would be critical in overcoming the social isolation that is experienced by some people who live and work in more remote areas, and in strengthening community connectedness.

The second issue was the provision of and access to public services. In evidence to us, stakeholders emphasised the need for people who live in rural communities to have easy access to a general practitioner, a dentist and reliable public transport. Such access was considered absolutely essential to the overall wellbeing and sustainability of those rural and island communities.

Finally, we heard how certain rural sectors, such as agriculture and fisheries, play a key role in implementing many of the national outcomes in their localities. That is particularly the case for national outcomes on communities, the environment and economic sustainability. As such, stakeholders raised concerns about the implications of cuts to the rural affairs portfolio in last year's budget and called for that to be remedied as part of the upcoming budget cycle.

The committee recommended that further clarity is needed from the Scottish Government about how it intends to fully rural proof the proposed new national outcomes. A practical way in which that could be achieved is by establishing national indicators that monitor and measure how effectively the national outcomes are delivered in rural and island areas.

In responding to our correspondence, the cabinet secretary committed to reflecting on the committee's recommendations as work progresses on the proposed new national outcomes, to see whether more can be done to further the interests of rural communities. I welcome that, because it is important that we get it right, and I will welcome any update from the cabinet secretary in her response to my speech. It is essential that the proposed new national outcomes address the challenges that are experienced by those who live and work in rural and island communities, to ensure that they play their part in delivering, and are able to enjoy living in, a sustainable and prosperous Scotland.

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

15:32

Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP): As convener of the Social Justice and Social Security Committee, I am pleased to contribute to the Finance and Public Administration Committee debate on the Scottish Government's proposed revised national outcomes.

The Social Justice and Social Security Committee welcomed the opportunity to participate in the scrutiny process. We are grateful to the Finance and Public Administration Committee for undertaking the consultation. That information, coupled with the evidence that we have gathered through our work on reducing poverty, informed our letter to the Scottish Government. The Social Justice and Social Security Committee thanks the cabinet secretary for her response, and appreciates the Scottish Government's recognition of the interconnected nature of the outcomes and their relationship to poverty. We are also pleased to hear that the Scottish Government acknowledges the leadership role that it should play in ensuring country-wide adoption of the national performance framework.

Of central concern to the committee is the outcome of reducing poverty, which it considered alongside several other outcomes that rely on poverty reduction in order to be achieved. We wrote to the cabinet secretary on that basis, highlighting how the national outcomes on care, housing, communities and equalities and human rights are intrinsically linked to the goal to reduce poverty. The committee explained the link between poverty and care by drawing on the research that it commissioned in 2023, which found that disabled households were more vulnerable to rising energy and food prices and that disability payments were not able to meet additional costs.

The committee was also recently involved in part 5 of the Housing (Scotland) Bill, on homelessness prevention. As part of that, we heard from Crisis, which said:

"homelessness is one of the most acute forms of poverty"—[*Official Report, Social Justice and Social Security Committee*, 13 June 2024; c 6.]

In order to end homelessness and achieve housing as an outcome, it is therefore clear that poverty must be addressed.

We also consider that the work of the third sector is essential to the fulfilment of the national outcomes, especially the outcome on communities. As part of the committee's pre-budget scrutiny this year, we heard from stakeholders across the third sector who made it clear that they need more certainty when it comes to their budgets. They emphasised that insecure

funding can mean insecure service delivery, which affects vulnerable people within communities, as well as eroding trust and cohesion.

Achieving equalities and human rights as an outcome also requires poverty to be reduced. We were struck by evidence that was provided to the committee by the Scottish Human Rights Commission, which said:

“Poverty represents a failure (a violation) to fulfil the right to an adequate standard of living as is established in international human rights law... Poverty, viewed through this lens, is thus best viewed as a cluster of human rights violations in Scotland.”

As well as detailing the cross-cutting nature of the national outcomes, our letter to the cabinet secretary stated that, if poverty is to be reduced, it is crucial that the outcomes influence decision making when it comes to the Scottish budget and programme for government. Scottish Women’s Aid has previously said that, given that the outcomes should demonstrate societal values, the budget should look at how it spends on those.

It is essential that it is recognised that the national outcomes will not be achieved unless poverty can be reduced. The Scottish Government must act to ensure that poverty reduction informs all areas of policy and budgetary planning, and that the needs of younger people living alone, disabled people and older people are captured alongside priority groups.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Ariane Burgess to speak on behalf of the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee.

15:37

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): As convener of the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee, I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate.

The committee focused its scrutiny of the revised national performance framework on the new housing outcome, which sets out an ambition for everyone to live in

“safe, high-quality and affordable homes that meet our needs”.

The outcome refers to the importance of everyone having homes that are safe, secure and accessible, across all tenures. They should also be energy efficient, and meet our needs through all stages of our lives. That aspiration is to be applauded and, indeed, it was universally welcomed by stakeholders. This is the first time that there has been a national outcome specifically on housing, despite its importance to all of us.

Having a home underpins our life chances, affecting our health, wellbeing, educational attainment and employment prospects. The

absence of a home causes enormous damage, particularly to the life chances of children. We are all too familiar with the housing emergency that Scotland currently finds itself in, and we know the human cost of that emergency, which was long in the making.

I hope that the creation of the new housing outcome aids in the response to the housing emergency, providing clarity of purpose. Housing is a complex and systemic issue, which is about much more than simply building homes. The committee hopes that the outcome will ensure that there is a joined-up approach between the full range of sectoral partners across both the public and private sectors.

However, although stakeholders told the committee that it would be difficult to disagree with the aspiration of the outcome, it was made clear to us that it is vital to measure what progress is being made. Without action, and measurement, all that we have is a worthy but toothless aspiration. Indeed, the Scottish Government’s housing strategy, “Housing to 2040”, is aspirational and worth while, but stakeholders have again told us that it is unclear how its ambitions will be realised or progress toward them measured.

Through the committee’s wider work on housing issues, including scrutiny of the Housing (Scotland) Bill, we know that there is a significant lack of robust data on the housing sector, in particular the size and cost of all rental tenures, and the condition of homes. I therefore thank the Minister for Housing for writing to the committee to advise that the Government is in the process of agreeing a set of indicators around the housing outcome, as they will be essential in measuring progress.

The outcome also refers to the importance of planning our communities, and it is therefore closely related to delivery of the Government’s national planning framework—NPF4. We should not lose sight that housing is the foundation of place making and of communities, supported by national developments such as active travel and nature networks. However, it has not yet been established how NPF4 will be monitored, and so it is unclear how we will know what progress is made towards meeting that worthwhile aspiration in the national outcome. For the housing outcome to be more than only words, it has to be underpinned by action, and we need robust data to determine whether progress is being made towards achieving it.

The new housing-specific outcome is a positive step, and it is much needed given the context of the housing emergency. However, we are presently a very long way from achieving the ambition for everyone to live in

“Safe, high-quality and affordable homes that meet our needs”.

Too many people across Scotland are currently struggling to find a safe and affordable home, and thousands will have spent Christmas homeless or in temporary accommodation. For their sake, I hope that this year we see the end of the housing emergency and the ambitions of the outcome are realised.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Clare Adamson to speak on behalf of the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee.

15:41

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): As the convener of the committee, I am delighted to speak to our report on this topic. I begin by thanking those members who took part in the inquiry during the past year, which focused on the response to the review of outcomes and indicators relating to the Scottish Government’s international work. As always, I also thank the committee clerks for their support.

I also to thank the witnesses who took time to give evidence to the committee. We had experts from Quebec, the Basque Country, Ireland’s Department of Foreign Affairs and the Scottish Council on Global Affairs.

I will highlight three aspects of our report, which are the link between the national performance framework and decision making, the importance of policy coherence and the matter of what is being measured.

We heard evidence that the national outcomes do not always inform policy spending. There could be a disconnect in the vision of the NPF and decision making. We also heard evidence that public bodies are reporting after the event rather than using the national outcomes to inform the process and decision making. I note from the work of the Finance and Public Administration Committee that that chimes with its key findings too. We asked the Scottish Government for examples of where the national outcomes have informed policy and spending decisions.

I now turn to the idea of policy coherence, which was a recurring theme from our 2022 report on Scotland’s international work. The Scottish Council on Global Affairs said that soft power, in international relations terms, is about how we will ensure a shared understanding across Government in the interests of policy coherence—

Sorry, I have moved to the wrong page of my speech notes. I will just need to continue where I was.

The Scottish Council on Global Affairs had raised concerns about international relations and

how soft power was perceived. The ambitions of the policy are broad. We want to be seen as an open, connected and positive contributing country, to be regarded as vibrant and modern, to have positive international relations and to influence exchanging networks. We also want to recognise the international connectedness of people and the obligations that flow from that. Those are very important ambitions. However, we heard that, in some respects, although the metrics have been developed and the indicators are there, what is not being considered is whether the performance—which is key to this—is being achieved.

Again, I thank those who took part in our work and contributed to it. We would like to see more clarity on the indicators, and a consultation of the wider community on what indicators would be best to inform the national objectives.

The Scottish International Development Alliance told the committee that

“There is currently a framework and an element of scrutiny, but all that is scrutinised is what we actually want to measure, not whether we have achieved it.”—[*Official Report, Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee*, 16 May 2024; c 48.]

That gets to the core of what the committee’s concerns are.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Edward Mountain to speak on behalf of the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee.

15:45

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I am pleased to contribute, on behalf of the NZET Committee, to the review of the national performance framework. We were tasked with scrutiny of two areas—the environment outcome and the new climate action outcome. Although we welcome the revisions, changing the words in a document takes us only so far, to be frank. There is a need to transform ambition into action.

The additional challenge is to take the public with us, otherwise change will not stick. Policies on the environment and net zero must be realistic, achievable and within a price range.

None of this is easy. However, it can be made easier if the public buy in on the basis that they will be the ones who make the positive changes. That was the key message of the people’s panel on climate change that the committee convened last year.

Let us begin with the environment outcome. The outcome focuses on protecting, restoring, enhancing and enjoying our natural environment. It now explicitly highlights the critical need for environmental restoration. The committee supports the updated definition, given the pressing

reality of, and the need to resolve, our degrading ecosystems.

I note concerns from some stakeholders about what they see as gaps in the outcome. They have called for more express reference to matters such as water quality, biodiversity conservation, pollution control and sustainable land use. We asked the Scottish Government to consider those points before finalising the framework, and it has committed to doing so.

The Scottish Government referred to the recently published Scottish biodiversity strategy and the upcoming natural environment bill, some aspects of which I fear may fall within the committee's remit. Although that shows a commitment to our natural environment, fine words butter no parsnips.

I turn to the climate action outcome, which aims to achieve a just transition to net zero while building resilience to climate change. That addition has been widely welcomed by stakeholders, and has been added to the framework to better align climate policy with the United Nations sustainable development goals. Scotland has ambitious emissions reduction targets, and we have highlighted the significant shortcomings in meeting those goals.

Progress needs to be more than changes in how targets are measured. It demands concrete actions that accelerate emissions reductions while supporting vulnerable populations in a fair transition. For instance, where are the Scottish Government's highly ambitious plans to reduce car use per kilometre by 20 per cent between 2020 and 2030? Where are the Scottish Government's policies to make that ambition a reality? What progress has been made so far?

The Scottish Government's allocation of £4.9 billion in the 2025-26 budget for climate change initiatives is significant, but is that really enough to face the challenges? Previous budgets had gaps in critical areas including peatland restoration and woodland restoration, which are both essential for achieving our climate ambitions. Simply put, we need to back our words with sufficient funding that is targeted in the right way at the right areas.

For the national performance framework to succeed, the Government must make sure that it synchronises its goals with policies and funding. Although the committee welcomes the two reworded national outcomes that we have scrutinised, it is time—now more than ever—that the Government's actions must speak louder than words.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Kate Forbes to speak on behalf of the Government. Deputy First Minister, you have a generous seven minutes.

15:49

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Gaelic (Kate Forbes): Thank you, Deputy Presiding Officer.

I thank colleagues on all sides of the chamber, as well as the wide and diverse range of stakeholders who have engaged with the review of the national outcomes and the national performance framework. In particular, I thank all the committees that have considered evidence and have written to ministers with recommendations. Particular thanks go to the Finance and Public Administration Committee for its report, which was published on 15 November. I will ensure that the Government responds in full before the deadline of 15 January.

A number of points have already been made in the debate, so although this is my opening statement, I almost feel like it needs to be a summary of responses to the excellent points that have been identified by the conveners of all the committees that have a stake in the national performance framework and the national outcomes.

John Mason: I note that the Deputy First Minister is going to respond in some detail to the points that have been made, but I would like a general view. What is her feeling on whether the national performance framework is high profile enough? We have spoken to civil servants and others, and they say that the framework underlies a lot of things, but a lot of the public have simply never heard of it.

Kate Forbes: I thank John Mason for that. The comments that he has made, both just now and in his intervention on Kenny Gibson, have been fleshed out in some of the comments from members about how we ensure that the national performance framework actually leads to action. Edward Mountain made that point. Others have talked about the framing and branding, and there has been consistent commentary on the importance of measurement—a number of conveners have made that point. I hope that what I set out in the next six and a half minutes will directly address all that and create a bit of space for us all to figure out what to do next.

I am encouraged by the range of feedback and views—I said that to the Finance and Public Administration Committee on 8 October—because I think that it

“demonstrates the NPF's value as a means for all of Scotland's actors and agencies to debate and to challenge the collective progress that we are making as a nation.”

I am pleased that the inquiry has concluded that

“the NPF remains an important agreed vision of the type of Scotland that we aspire to be.”

A lot of the recommendations, which are welcome, focus on action and improvement, and that is where we need to start.

I will set the inquiry in some new context, before setting out the action that I propose we take in direct response to what I have heard. Work on the current review of the national outcomes began in 2022, with public engagement in 2023. We describe the scope of the review, which was agreed in the context of our emerging from Covid, rising inflation and the Ukraine conflict, as

“a course correction rather than another complete overhaul.”

At that point, however, none of us fully appreciated the impact of those crises. The scale of the challenge is such that if we are to meet the expectations and ambitions of the people of Scotland, I believe—and I state it today—that a more substantial programme of reform is required. That includes more substantial reform of the national performance framework—reform that would support and enhance collaboration between all the various layers of Government to reach out to and to empower and engage communities, and to let us understand and address more effectively the complex problems that we face as a society.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): I am interested in the cabinet secretary's points around use of the performance framework as a vehicle for change. Is one of the problems with the current framework that it is very static? It is a set of measures—it does not actually set out a vision for change. Does it need to contain such a vision, or does a vision for change—a theory of change—need to overlay the performance framework as a part of that fundamental review?

Kate Forbes: That is a good question, and I would like us to explore it as we proceed with a more substantial overhaul. Reforming the national performance framework needs to mean change and matching of ambition with action, which goes straight to the heart of some of the comments that conveners have made in their speeches. That is not to dismiss the previous work—we need to build on all that work, which has got us here today. However, we need to revisit and revise proposals that were made as part of the review.

When the national performance framework was first introduced, taken in parallel with the recommendation of the Christie commission, the hope and the expectation was that it would shape, and change for the better, the way that we govern in Scotland, and would put the focus more on agreed outcomes. We hear often in Parliament the refrain that we should focus on outcomes, not on inputs, and that we should remove policy and budgetary silos, thereby enabling spending to be

targeted effectively, and encouraging and supporting investment in prevention.

Those are all issues that I think every committee, in budget and policy scrutiny, regularly returns to. I know that members recognise and endorse those ambitions. In the report that we are debating, the evidence base is clear that there is an appetite for change to do that more effectively. That is why, with the support of the Parliament, I would very much like us to recover some of the early ambition and to create a renewed and reformed national performance framework that can drive the next decade of public sector reform.

I propose that we look again at every aspect of the national performance framework to support the development and implementation of a stronger and more strategic and impactful framework for Scotland. I hope that that gives a direct answer to a number of questions—

Finlay Carson: Does that include consideration of specific policies relating to rural Scotland? In my contribution, I touched on views that we have heard in the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee, and it is absolutely clear that there is a lack of focus on rural and island communities within the national outcomes.

Kate Forbes: The short answer is yes. In no way do I want to dismiss the excellent points that have been made in the debate. All the thoughts, perspectives and evidence that committees across the Parliament have gathered are precisely where we need to start with making fundamental reform. If what the RAI Committee has heard can be fed into that, that will, to my mind, be key.

If we focus our resources on reform, that will allow us to take more decisive action. That is exactly how I think the Government should operate and govern.

The national performance framework sets out the kind of country that we want Scotland to be. We need to get it right. A lot of fair comments have been made and I will take them on board. I thank members of the committee for the report and their contributions.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): Craig Hoy will open on behalf of the Scottish Conservatives. Mr Hoy, you have a generous six minutes.

15:57

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): I thank the convener of the Finance and Public Administration Committee for securing the motion for considered debate in the chamber, and I thank committee conveners for their contributions so far. I say for clarity that, although I was involved in reviewing the final report, I was not a member of the Finance

and Public Administration Committee during the evidence-gathering process or the drafting of the report. However, I fully support the report's sentiments and conclusions, because it sheds yet more light on the performance and operation of the Scottish Government.

The Government has been in office for 18 years. The national performance framework is meant to tell us "what good looks like", yet only 61 of the 81 indicators are measurable, and 11 of those show that there has been a deterioration in performance. Three out of eight critical indicators—in fair work, business and health—are worsening. None of the indicators in poverty, culture or health show any improvement at all, while four out of nine indicators in education, which was Nicola Sturgeon's overriding mission, have no data available whatsoever. Rightly, the committee report describes that as unacceptable. How on earth can progress be measured if there is no data against which to measure it?

This week, the First Minister said that he hoped to give hope to the nation, and I hope that he can finally do so, because, at present, far too many Scots are despairing of the Scottish National Party's record in office. It is a record of broken promises, profligate spending and a lack of focus on actual and material outcomes. Targets have been set; targets have been missed. There are too many strategies, too many working groups, too many action groups, too many steering groups, too many frameworks and simply not enough delivery.

The Finance and Public Administration Committee's report exposes a disconnect between the Scottish Government's rhetoric and the reality on the ground across the public sector in Scotland. It refers to a lack of coherence between the national performance framework's outcomes and the Scottish Government's stated outcomes, including those of the First Minister.

The First Minister said this week that his focus was on economic growth, which is a prerequisite to delivering on his long-overdue priority of eradicating child poverty. Why, then, do the performance indicators measure only the wellbeing economy—whatever that is—and not real-terms growth in Scotland's gross domestic product?

An economy without growth may be many things, but it cannot be a well economy, let alone a wellbeing one. That is the greatest and most damaging shortcoming among the Government's many shortcomings, which are obviously included in the framework. It talks of growth, yet does little, if anything, to deliver it. How can growth be deemed a priority for our nation if it is absent from the nation's framework? That point is noted in the

report, which states that the public responses were critical of the Government's

"omission of explicit references to economic growth."

This Government, in recent years aided and abetted by its colleagues in the Greens, pays only lip service to growth. The First Minister today appeared on radio repeating the mantra but offering little in the way of an economically credible or recognisable strategy to achieve it.

If the Scottish economy had grown at the same rate as that of the rest of the United Kingdom, it would be £10.7 billion larger, and the Scottish Government would have had £600 million extra in revenues to spend on services or to support business to drive growth. The UK economy has been too sluggish in recent years, but to underperform a sluggish economy is surely worse still.

John Mason: We have been over this point previously, but does the member accept that it is hard for Scotland to compete with London and the south-east, whereas we can compete with other parts of England?

Craig Hoy: I concede that it is presently hard to do so, but we could start to compete if we made ourselves competitive. That is why the Scottish Conservatives argued to lower tax in Scotland, so that we would have a competitive advantage over south-east England.

Daniel Johnson: Will the member take an intervention?

Craig Hoy: I am sorry; I do not have time.

Daniel Johnson: It might help.

Craig Hoy: I will take a helpful intervention.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I say to members that there is quite a bit of time in hand.

Daniel Johnson: Does Craig Hoy agree that, although it might not be possible to compete with London, it is possible to compete with Manchester, whose growth in terms of GDP per head is around twice that of Scotland?

Craig Hoy: I thank Daniel Johnson for being helpful—it is good to see that he is helpful to the Conservatives as well as the SNP these days.

Daniel Johnson: I am even-handed.

Craig Hoy: I accept that the UK economy has been too sluggish in recent years, but the Scottish Conservatives are now the only party in the chamber that is committed to economic growth. That is why we set out crystal-clear plans for cutting tax and boosting our economy. We did that because the SNP is not focused on those commonsense priorities—for the avoidance of doubt, I say that we are.

The Finance and Public Administration Committee report mentions another discrepancy. It says that the Scottish Government wants to eradicate poverty, yet the national performance framework mentions only reducing it. What is the Government's goal—reducing it or eradicating it? Either way, it is failing, because the dial is not moving.

Less than half the Scottish Government's key performance indicators are improving, and the rest are either stagnant or getting worse. Those statistics point to a Government that is neither in control nor in command. That clearly calls for reform of the national performance indicators, if they are meant to be driving improvements.

As the committee suggests, a proper audit of the policy process means that the framework should have greater prominence in headline announcements, such as the programme for government. It is currently not a practical tool for decision making. If the Government really wants to hold itself to account, it should use the outcomes more effectively.

The cabinet secretary might not be shocked to hear that, when I raised the national performance framework in my local pub at the weekend, not one person I asked was aware of it. I encourage her to break out beyond the Holyrood bubble.

Kate Forbes: Will the member take an intervention?

Craig Hoy: I will take an intervention, and then I will make an invitation to the cabinet secretary.

Kate Forbes: I can suggest some good books and conversation starters that might help the member the next time he is in the pub.

The national performance framework is aligned with the UN sustainable goals, which I imagine that the Conservatives are behind—Mr Hoy can confirm whether that is the case. How do the Conservatives see the process of navigating a route through choices in situations in which UN sustainable goals conflict with one another? Mr Hoy talked about GDP growth, of which I, too, am an advocate. Clearly, however, there cannot be growth at any and all expense. How does he weigh those things up in his political choices?

Craig Hoy: For example, in relation to energy supply, I would not be against future use of coal-fired power stations from the next generation, but I would support the next generation of nuclear, because that is a clean, safe and efficient way to deliver Scotland's power now and into the future.

I extend an invitation to the cabinet secretary—if she wants to break out beyond the Holyrood bubble, she is welcome to join us in the Tweeddale Arms in Gifford, where she could have a soft drink; I might have a pint. She would hear

some frank assessments of the Government's performance, and I am sure that the cost of a pint would be far cheaper than running the whole enterprise of the national performance framework.

The national outcomes are not even a blunt instrument—they appear to be the wrong instrument entirely in many respects. That is why we need common sense for a change, not another nebulous, badly designed tick-box exercise that would do little to drive the meaningful improvements that our public services in Scotland badly need, if the SNP is truly to deliver hope to the nation.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Daniel Johnson will open on behalf of Scottish Labour, with a generous five minutes.

16:05

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): It is always great to take part in a Finance and Public Administration Committee debate. I feel as if I am back with my own people. I was going to congratulate the committee on bringing the topic back to the chamber, because it is rarely discussed outside the confines of the committee, but I must stand corrected because, just this morning, the Deputy First Minister raised the national performance framework at the Economy and Fair Work Committee. However, the way in which she did so was quite interesting and quite telling. She said that the national framework “should” inform policy and that it “should” be the lodestar by which policy is framed and set. I might just be being a cynical Opposition politician, but I thought that that demonstrated a bit of the gap that exists in relation to the national performance framework.

I do not think that anyone should really object to the Government attempting to set out how broader policy should sit alongside economic outcomes, how it attempts to weave together the broad range of different things that it sets out to do and how it measures them. It is not that the national performance framework is the wrong thing to do—the problem is that it does not really have the status, importance and, dare I say, coherence that it needs. That is what absolutely every member has been alluding to. They might not have been quite as vociferous as Mr Hoy, but that is the common thread.

When we look at the budget, it sums up the problem with the national performance framework. The framework is there, but as a bunch of icons. We are meant to understand what that means. We are meant to understand how the budget is helping and the reason why the icon from the framework sits there. It is not so much a tick-box exercise as an exercise in sticking the right icon in

the right budget area. No one will really understand why, and there is certainly no explanation as to why.

There is also inherently a fudge at the heart of the national performance framework. The Government has become undecided or awkward about how it should frame economic growth and where economic growth sits alongside other policy objectives. That is a great shame, because the national performance framework is exactly the place where that should be articulated. It is not about GDP growth—I reject that. It should be about GDP growth per head sitting alongside the Gini coefficient, which is an expression of inequality. That is how we understand economic growth from a broader economic perspective. The fact that GDP is absent—it is not even set in that context—from the national performance framework as currently set out shows its weakness.

Likewise, the NPF is just a snapshot. We have the measurement showing where performance has been maintained or has declined or improved but, without the broader time series, we cannot really understand what that means. Sometimes, the Government is undermining its own measures. On some measures, it says that performance has been maintained when, over a five-year period, it has been improving; or it says that performance has been maintained when, over a five-year period, it has been declining. For example, the percentage of businesses with high growth is flat, but the measure says that it is improving; and the number of people in sustainable employment is improving, but the measure says that it is being maintained. The national performance framework says that the number of people participating in the economy is being maintained, but the number is declining. We need context. Without context, the national performance framework provides no insight whatsoever.

This is also about structure. What the Deputy First Minister was saying about reform was quite interesting because, for the framework to drive reform, we need to understand the linkages. The committee has been clear that it is important that the framework demonstrates an understanding of and sets out “interlinkages and co-dependencies”.

That can be no clearer than in relation to housing. It is great that housing is part of the national performance framework—that is useful and important—but it needs to set out much more clearly how housing impacts on wages and employment. Those sorts of linkages should exist in the national performance framework. It is the place for them and, without such linkages, it will not be informative.

Ultimately, I detect other bits of work in this area. I look at the framework and I see threads of

things such as the balanced scorecard devised by Kaplan and Norton; I see hints of things that were worked on by people such as Michael Barber in the delivery unit, when Labour was previously in government. However, the framework lacks two things, because both the things that I mentioned reflect that we need to understand the weightings and importance of what we measure, as well as the linkages. Measuring in itself is not enough.

Another important lesson from Michael Barber’s delivery unit is that it is not just about reporting on certain measures but about the status that we give the measures. There needs to be a unit or other place where the measures are given focus and attention and where people are held to account.

The greatest weakness of the national performance framework is that we discuss it only at times such as this. When was the last time that a cabinet secretary made a statement about how their portfolio was performing against the national performance framework? Fin Carson is absolutely right that, if the national performance framework is to be relevant, we need to be able to see how an area such as the rural economy is performing against it. We cannot and do not do that. Until that happens, the national performance framework will be meaningless.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to the open debate. I remind members that we have some time in hand.

16:11

Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): First, let me put on the record how much I value the potential of a national performance framework. If done right, it should be a bold, audacious, visionary and ambitious document, to which all our efforts aspire, even though we should be in the full knowledge that perfection can never be attained. However, it is fair to say that that is not where we are.

The convener and others have talked about purpose. The proposed wording has moved from including

“sustainable and inclusive economic growth”

to the somewhat bland

“To improve the wellbeing of people living in Scotland now and in the future”.

If we were to put that wording to the test with a multitude of stakeholders, we would get a multitude of answers. There is perhaps merit in being all things to all people, but it does not exactly fill me with confidence.

I also share the concerns about the language and ambition around poverty. Making reducing poverty an objective might well be politically

pragmatic, but it stops well short of the ambition that I believe that we should be showing—as encapsulated by the First Minister—to eradicate poverty.

We have heard a huge range of the committee's views in the debate thus far, so I will limit my remarks to some points that intrigued me and which are, I hope, different from those that have already been made.

John Mason: In an ideal world, we would all like to completely eradicate poverty, but does the member accept that, frankly, it is impossible to do so?

Michelle Thomson: Of course I accept that, but I have tried to explain that we cannot give up at the first hurdle and simply say that we will just reduce it, because, frankly, that does not encapsulate boldness and ambition. We are setting not only the Government's agenda but the country's agenda. That is why I would happily keep us aligned with the UN SDGs and be ambitious. I hope that that answers the member's question.

I want to make a few comments about the importance of democracy. We are looking with increased concern at proxy actors in our geopolitics and, closer to home, at attempts to influence our politics by unelected billionaires. In its submission, the Wellbeing Economy Alliance Scotland highlighted that the proposed national outcomes and the wider NPF do not include any references to the values of democracy and participation beyond the value of acting in an open and transparent way. It described that as a "major omission".

Arguably, even a few months ago, we could not have imagined that we might need to make space, perhaps following the statement of purpose, to include wording along the lines of "At all times, we shall act to protect the values of democracy, such as free speech and the right of assembly, and ensure that our laws and justice system provide robust guarantees for a democratic society", but perhaps that is where we are.

I also point out that, based on his recent research with Carnegie UK, Dr Max French noted in his submission to the joint committee consultation that

"We could not find a single case where the National Outcomes and Indicators were actively used (not just passively referenced/aligned to) in the design, appraisal or evaluation of a Scottish Government national policy or strategy."

I would therefore like to ask the Government two questions. First, how is the NPF used to inform discussions in Cabinet and elsewhere in Government? Secondly, how will the Government ensure that the NPF is always taken into account

in policy decisions? It is only through the use of the NPF in informing decision making that its potential value might be realised, otherwise there is no point to it.

If the NPF is to enable effective policy decisions, it must be underpinned by effective data collection—I think that the cabinet secretary already knows that that is an interest of mine. An issue for the Scottish Government is that it neither holds nor controls all the data that it needs for proper policy development. Indeed, we need look only to our recent discussions about the two-child cap to see that.

The committee report also highlights concerns about the lack of disaggregated data from the equality impact assessment to enable a more gendered NPF and to interrogate the complexities of an intersectional approach. I am not proposing some new massive data-gathering industry, but I think that a move to utilising more open Government data would provide the basis for rapid acceleration of improvements, particularly when linked with artificial intelligence and technology. That is vital.

I note that the proposals for an updated NPF has "Equality and Human Rights" as one of its national outcomes. That seems to me to be inviting potential conflict, given that equality is a collective, society-wide outcome and could be set against individual-based human rights. As Professor Rowan Cruft observed in his time for reflection, human rights matter because they mean that

"the individual must not be sacrificed for the sake of society."—[*Official Report*, 17 September 2024; c 1.]

That is another area that it would be beneficial to bear in mind.

16:17

Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): I echo my colleague Craig Hoy's thanks to the Finance and Public Administration Committee for its work in compiling such an extensive report.

Mr Hoy has comprehensively covered many of the issues, as have many other members. As the committee's report briefly touches on gender equality and justice, I will use my speech to talk about those two issues in more detail.

The report expresses disappointment that the outcome of the thematic gender review was not published early enough to be considered by committee witnesses. At the same time, the Scottish Women's Budget Group criticised the proposed changes to the national outcomes as ineffectual.

The SNP Government claims that it wants to create a fairer and more just Scotland. However,

in its almost 18 years of governance, it has been more focused on breaking up the United Kingdom than on delivering what the people of Scotland want.

I will now talk about some of the SNP's greatest accomplishments—or, rather, failures. I have made it clear in the chamber many times that the protection of women and girls is of the utmost importance. The SNP Government's human rights national outcome states:

"We stand together to challenge unfairness and our equalities legislation, law and practice are world leading. We uphold human rights, democracy and the rule of law, and our justice systems are proportionate, fair and effective."

The claim that Scotland's equalities legislation is "world leading" is, at the very least, laughable. Three years ago, the SNP Government introduced the doomed Gender Recognition Reform (Scotland) Bill, which, if enacted, would have put women and girls at risk. Two years ago, Scotland became the laughing stock of the world when a double rapist was initially sent to a women's prison simply by declaring that he was a woman, something that the SNP Government said would never happen. That is the opposite of a "proportionate, fair and effective" justice system.

Speaking of the justice system, I note that police numbers have fallen while crime has risen. Police Scotland recorded almost 64,000 incidents of domestic abuse in a year, which is up 3 per cent from the year before. There are no national outcomes that focus directly on justice for victims and for wider society in relation to criminal behaviour; in fact, there is no national performance indicator that measures actual crime rates.

The SNP has failed when it comes to other national outcomes, such as on health, where accident and emergency waiting times are skyrocketing; on climate change, where the SNP has missed target after target; on education, where the attainment gap is constantly widening; and on many more issues that I do not have time to go through today.

I acknowledge the briefing that Age Scotland sent, which highlighted its disappointment at the fact that there is no new outcome focusing on older people.

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): Will the member give way?

Pam Gosal: I am just winding up.

As Age Scotland does great work in standing up for the most vulnerable, I hope that the Scottish Government takes that view into consideration.

I hope that the new year marks a new beginning for the SNP. However, if the past 18 years are anything to go on, not much will change.

16:21

Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): Before today's debate, a number of policy organisations wrote to us and were quite enthusiastic about the national performance framework and the review of the national outcomes. Oxfam welcomed the fact that a dedicated national outcome on care is to be included, and rightly so, and likewise with housing. Oxfam went on to say that not having care in the previous set of national outcomes was a major omission. That led me to wonder whether it would have made any difference to care and the provision of care in Scotland had care been included. My view is that it would not.

I was interested to hear the Deputy First Minister speak about the need for a more substantial programme of reform. I agree with that, but I do not think that the review of the national outcomes and the national performance framework will deliver the type of reform that we need across Scotland—far from it. From that point of view, and given the framework's history over the years, I would describe it as a failure, because it has not improved public services across Scotland—far from it.

For seven years, I was a member of the Fife partnership and attended meetings every three months. Indeed, I chaired the Fife partnership for a number of years. Officers would come along and show us lines to the national outcomes and to the national indicators, and boxes would be ticked. Eventually, I thought, "This is a tick-box exercise that is not achieving much." That is my view on the framework.

John Mason: The member makes some valid points. Does he think that the NPF is trying to do too much and that there are too many outcomes? Does he agree that, if we had, say, three or four outcomes, that would be better and would have more impact?

Alex Rowley: Take, for example, the fact that housing has been included. If we are going to have such outcomes, housing should be included. However, I do not think that including housing in the framework will make much difference to the housing crisis. My office covers Mid Scotland and Fife, and we have hundreds of constituents contacting us every year. It is heartbreaking when we meet people and listen to their problems of homelessness, poor housing conditions and so on. We are not making progress; if anything, the situation is getting worse.

Who would disagree with the outcome on housing? It states:

“We live in safe, high-quality and affordable homes that meet our needs”.

It continues:

“We ensure that everyone has housing that is safe, secure, accessible and affordable. Homelessness and the causes of homelessness are addressed”,

and it goes on. All that is, in the end, is a kind of wish for how we would want things to be. If we actually want to tackle the housing crisis, we will have to do far more than come up with those nice words.

Kate Forbes: I am very interested in how we do that. For the avoidance of any doubt, I am suggesting that we reform the national performance framework itself, so that it leads to reform. I take on board the criticisms that have been made.

How we deliver big societal change, away from tick-box exercises, is a fascinating question. I spoke to representatives of the Welsh Government about what it has done, as it has tried to embed the UN sustainable development goals so that it reviews every policy change that it makes and every penny that it spends against the sustainable development goals.

I have never seen big societal change delivered as a result of a tick-box exercise. There is a big question here about how we corral everyone behind the big changes. Often, we do not need tick-box exercises; we just need to see what we need to achieve for the constituents Alex Rowley is talking about.

Alex Rowley: For housing, we need a far better partnership, with local government and central Government working together. We need a national house plan and 32 local delivery plans for how we are going to build the houses in each of the 32 local authorities. That partnership is about treating both levels of government as equals in coming together and working out, from a national strategy, how to deliver locally. Finance is clearly part of that, but so is planning and the acquisition of land—and therefore powers for local authorities. If people are to come together and work to achieve the outcome together, the Government needs to go much further than just words, using partnerships or ticking boxes.

The Deputy First Minister mentioned the Christie commission. I remember when John Swinney and Derek Mackay went round local authorities talking about Christie, the proposed framework and how we would deliver. We failed. Christie was clear that prevention was the way forward: we had to prevent people from getting to the point of being in hospital, and we needed to give people warm,

secure homes. We failed on all of that, and prevention is something that we have not achieved.

We have had a lot of warm words and a lot of strategies, but we have actually had a lot of failure. If we are going to transform Scotland and drive it forward, we must go beyond warm words.

16:27

Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): For me, the national performance framework has certainly made a positive impact since 2018. It is not perfect, but it has provided an overarching framework and focus on the national outcomes, reflecting our shared priorities and the international aspirations of the 17 sustainable development goals that are embedded in it. Together, they have been a north star at a time of challenge.

I recognise the points that have just been made by Alex Rowley, but—and this is meant not to make excuses but to provide a reason—let us not forget the context. We have had a period of austerity, with unexpected interruption from Brexit, the pandemic, the current situation with the war in Ukraine and the economic impact of UK Government decisions on the economy in recent times. I say that to provide context, as I think that that is important for how we move forward. I will say more about that in a minute.

The 11 national outcomes and 81 national indicators have given us a sense of where to aim for. Some members have said that they are nebulous and others have said that they are nice words, but they have provided a useful and, I think, effective map for stakeholders, civil servants, public bodies, local authorities and the Government itself. Public finance ministers have had to report every year on the Government's progress towards the outcomes in the national performance framework.

The cabinet secretary has provided insight on the process that the Government will undertake in order to move forward. However, there is a question to consider, which I call the Leith Walk test. What would people say if I walked down into my constituency and when going past them I asked, “What do you think of the national performance framework?” There are quite a lot of civil servants that go up that way—[Laughter.]—but I am not sure that there would be much recognition unless I was lucky enough to bump into one of them.

I do not say that to diminish or undermine the work that is being done on the national performance framework but to provide background. When we build on the national performance framework and move forward to

whatever comes next, the approach has to be about how we set shared goals that we all know and recognise.

What is the vision for Scotland for the next part of the 21st century? We are 25 years into devolution. Others have said this, but we have entered a period where we have moved beyond the 2014 referendum and what came before and after that. There is still political difference in this chamber and in wider society, but we have to get to a place where, when we discuss issues, we focus less on conflict and the negatives and more on the positives and what we share and agree on. What do we want to do, and how do we reach tangible and aspirational agreed positions, on which we are bound together beyond the election cycle?

I say that because a lot of the challenge that we have faced in recent times has been because we have a political culture that is habitually focused on how we win and get the better of one another. I have said for some time that we need to get into a different political space, particularly as the challenges are getting more and more acute. They include the reform that is needed in our public services, financial challenge and economic competitiveness and a geopolitical situation that is becoming increasingly challenging. The whole question of the ability of democracy to deliver for people is receiving more attention than it has throughout my lifetime.

This is an amazing opportunity for us all.

Clare Adamson: In this afternoon's debate, a lot of us have been speaking as committee conveners. One of the things that my committee highlighted in its report was a lack of a shared understanding of the goals within the committees themselves. Mr Johnson also spoke about that. We allocate these Scrabble tiles but we do not actually have an understanding of the priorities.

The CEEAC Committee's report talks about a feminist foreign policy, which touches on the issues that Ms Gosal was talking about and the promotion of human rights, which runs throughout the work of the Parliament in what we do globally. It also touches on climate justice, which Mr Mountain talked about, but I do not know whether the international understanding of climate justice—the large vision—is ever discussed in the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee. Therefore, do you think that, as a Parliament, as well as politicians and parties, we have to examine how we deal with these issues, too?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please always speak through the chair.

Ben Macpherson: Clare Adamson has said that absolutely brilliantly and I could not disagree with anything that she put forward.

The issue gets to the heart of both the parliamentary and the public domain. We may disagree on the constitution, financial policy and taxation, and we may disagree on different issues of devolved policy. However, where are the shared pillars, anchors and agreed outcomes that we are determined to get to and that we know are right for all of Scotland? That is both the opportunity and the challenge as we take forward the national performance framework.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to the closing speeches. I call Daniel Johnson to close on behalf of Scottish Labour. You have around four minutes.

16:35

Daniel Johnson: Yes, I am afraid that it is true that members will have to listen to me twice in this debate.

I will follow on directly from the last two speakers. Ben Macpherson is right: in these challenging times, we need to concentrate on substance, not personality. This debate goes to the very heart of that. Done right, this stuff could make a difference—but it does not, and that needs to be challenged. There has been some acknowledgement, with varying degrees of enthusiasm and diplomacy, that something is not quite right with the national performance framework.

Alex Rowley hit the nail on the head when he asked whether it would make a difference if something were to be included in the national performance framework or not and whether it will make a difference if housing is included. No one is disputing that housing should be included. It absolutely should be, because, as speakers have highlighted throughout the debate, if we do not have good housing, we are just going to make poverty worse. We are going to make it harder to meet our objectives, whether those are explicitly on the economy or even on healthcare. If we do not have secure housing, how are people ever going to access good healthcare?

John Mason: Will the member give way?

Daniel Johnson: I will give way to Mr Mason in a moment.

Will simply having a metric in the national performance framework make a difference to outcomes? It will not, because simply reporting on a figure—and, as we heard from Ariane Burgess, we do not even have those agreed measures in the NPF—will never make a difference. We need more than just a measure; we need a theory of change and to give prominence and importance to those measures.

John Mason: I agree, to an extent, with what the member is saying, but given that there has been such a push to have reference to care and other issues added to the national outcomes, does he accept that it is clear that some people in the third sector and beyond think that it makes a difference to have such issues included in the national outcomes? It should probably make more difference, but it is making a difference.

Daniel Johnson: It is absolutely correct to say that such matters are important, but will including them in the national outcomes make a difference? No, it will not. The issue is not what we measure. Mr Mason has made a number of interventions in which he has asked whether we need to reduce the number of outcomes. Is the NPF too complicated or is the list of outcomes too short? I say with respect to Mr Mason that that is the wrong question. The question is whether the national outcomes are given enough importance. Measuring things can make a difference when we attach sufficient prominence and importance to them.

We talk about waiting times in the health service. If there is a number that makes the Government flinch, it is that one. As well as its being given prominence, people understand what that number means. People understand that waiting times performance is not a perfect explainer of how good their healthcare is. Lots of other things are important, too, such as how good the quality is when people arrive at the point of treatment and how efficiently that treatment is provided and the expertise is deployed. However, waiting times are a good indicator of how well other parts of the system are performing.

If the Government is serious about this stuff, it needs to do two things. First, there needs to be a much greater focus on performance. Simply publishing a report once a year does not cut it. We need to get ministers in front of Parliament to report on performance against the indicators. Furthermore, there need to be meetings of groups within Government, so that they can understand how things work and hold people to account.

More importantly—this relates to what the Deputy First Minister said earlier—the NPF cannot simply be a collection of measures that tell people how things are. There has to be a theory of change embedded in them. They need to tell people not only how things are, but how things are changing. Right now, as I see it, there is nothing in the NPF on that, and there are too many fudges.

I absolutely agree with Mr Hoy that the NPF dances around the economy. Yes, I believe that things such as tackling poverty are fundamentally important, but unless we have a clear-eyed view of how our economy is performing—that it is helping people into better jobs, better wages and better

work—we will never be able to deal with things such as poverty or homelessness. If we dance around those things rather than deal with them head on, we are very likely to make things worse, not better.

We need to attach a greater importance to this; we need people to be held accountable for it; we need measures that measure change; and we need the economy to be front and centre in the performance framework rather than skirted around.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Murdo Fraser to close on behalf of the Scottish Conservatives.

16:40

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Like everybody else, I thank the Finance and Public Administration Committee for the work that it has done on its report, and I thank the convener for his opening statement. We have heard from a number of committee conveners, but none produce motions as excellent as those of the convener of the Finance and Public Administration Committee, so I pay tribute to him for that. *[Interruption.]* Yes, what a sook I am, as somebody just said.

Two key issues underpin the debate. First, what is the purpose of the national performance framework, and are we asking the right questions? Secondly, how does the Scottish Government perform against the questions that it has set for itself? Throughout the debate, we have touched on those issues. It is fair to say, as my friend Craig Hoy said, that this is not the talk of the steamie—nor even of the Tweeddale Arms in Gifford, apparently—but a tool that is used by civil servants and others in the public sector.

Michelle Thomson: Murdo Fraser has touched on a point that has not come up in the debate thus far. In our report, we had commentary on whom the NPF belongs to—the Scottish Government or all of Scotland. There is merit in both of those arguments. If all public sector agencies are aligned to the higher mission and values, that could work; however, that leaves a gap. Our report expressed that those agencies felt as though they were doing everything, and they were asking where the Government fits in. I would be interested in Murdo Fraser's views on that.

Murdo Fraser: That was an interesting intervention. If the NPF belongs to wider Scotland, we have to ask ourselves how much of wider Scotland is aware of its existence, far less has the opportunity to input. Ben Macpherson made some points on that.

In the previous session of the Parliament, I sat on a cross-party working group that looked at a refresh of the national performance framework. It was chaired by the then finance secretary, Derek Mackay. That discussion was dominated by sectoral interest groups from the third sector, who were all there to lobby for their particular interests. Derek Mackay and I found ourselves unlikely allies in trying to push back against some of that and keep the focus on what should be the core function of Government.

That leads me to the issue of the economy, which Daniel Johnson was talking about a moment ago. It is fundamentally important. I share the view that Craig Hoy and Michelle Thomson expressed, that there needs to be more of a focus on the economy when it comes to the national outcomes. Both the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister have talked about economic growth as a stated priority. However, there is no mention in the national outcomes of economic growth per se. Instead, the focus is on the wellbeing economy.

Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP): The economy is a very good area to focus on. Perhaps one of the issues over the years has been the eagerness to set targets, outcomes or elements of the national performance framework that the Scottish Government will never have it in its gift to deliver alone but will be a joint effort with others. If there was a mutual understanding of the responsibilities for and inputs to the economy and, between Westminster and Scotland, our targets for the economy, we would be more likely to get a meaningful outcome and the accountability that should go with that.

Murdo Fraser: Keith Brown raises an interesting question. The economy is a shared competence between the UK Government and the Scottish Government. We, in Scotland, can try to measure the performance of the Scottish economy relative to that of the UK as a whole, but there will be areas that require both Governments to work together. There has been some of that—for example, in relation to city deals, levelling up and the green freeports agenda—but perhaps the area requires a bit more work.

I return to what I was saying about the economy. Michelle Thomson tried to explain what the term “wellbeing economy” means. With respect to her, I have yet to hear a clear definition. Until we have that understanding, we will never be clear about the purpose of economic growth and how it sits within the national performance framework. I am firmly of the view that economic growth is important and is a good in itself, and that creating wealth is a good in itself. That is how we help to eradicate poverty and spread wealth through society. It is disappointing that what should be a key objective of a Government—to

drive economic growth—is not covered in the national outcomes. In its report, the committee highlights the fact that many consultation submissions raised concern regarding the omission of explicit references to economic growth.

The committee also called for an effective implementation plan for the national outcomes. If the NPF is to be more than a box-ticking exercise, we need to see a plan for delivery. Those criticisms are not new, having been raised back in 2022. The Government says that it will provide such a plan, but we still have not seen it.

My final point on the first question, about how the framework is drawn up, is about what is not measured. Where, for example, is the measure of efficient use of public resources in Government? Where is the measure of a target for efficiency savings in Government departments? That is commonplace in the private sector, but we do not see it in the public sector.

Am I okay for time, Deputy Presiding Officer?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I think that another minute would be in order.

Murdo Fraser: That would be fine, thank you. I will try to say what I have to say in another minute.

I will touch briefly on the second question, which is that of performance. There are 81 national indicators; however, as Craig Hoy said, only 61 are actually measurable. As of last year, there was no data available for 11 of those, despite their having been agreed as part of the previous review, in 2018. We cannot measure progress if we do not have the data. Of the 61 indicators, fewer than half show performance improving, and 11 even show worsening outcomes. Three out of eight indicators are worsening in both the fair work and business and health categories, and four out of nine education indicators have no data available.

What this report therefore tells us is that the Government is simply failing either to deliver on its national outcomes or to demonstrate that it is making any serious effort to do so. There are weaknesses here. Is the national performance framework a useful tool? It may be—frankly, the jury is still out on that. However, if we accept that it exists and that it has a purpose, the Government has to do much more to demonstrate that it is trying to meet the very objectives that it has set itself.

16:47

Kate Forbes: I will address a number of points that members made in the debate, but I will first repeat some of the points that I made in my opening speech, for fear that they may have got lost in some of the other comments.

Over the next year, we propose to start again with the national performance framework—in other words, to look again at every aspect of it in order to develop and implement a stronger and more strategic and impactful framework for Scotland. I appreciate that some people may respond to the word “reform” with impatience. There will be stakeholders and users who were expecting a revised framework to be in place soon after the inquiry, but there are positives and opportunities in our approach, particularly if we take on board all the comments that have been made in the chamber this afternoon. There is an opportunity to really listen to those comments, act on the evidence and set things up well for the longer term. My opinion is that the status quo, or business as usual, is now not an option, and I think that that reflects what has been said across the chamber this afternoon.

It appears that most people agree that the national performance framework and national outcomes aim to set out the kind of country that we want Scotland to be. That is largely because they are based on the United Nations sustainable development goals. I am unsure as to whether people in Craig Hoy’s local pub would be familiar with the UN sustainable development goals. However, it is about Governments taking those northern lights, as it were, and trying to set a framework around them, which is what we are seeking to do. We want it to be a framework for all of Scotland, albeit that it may not be instantly recognised across Scotland.

We recognise that Government needs to lead on that work, but we are committing this afternoon to properly reviewing the national performance framework for the longer term, for all the reasons that have been set out, and working with Parliament to ensure that we set out some clear goals that we can base Scotland’s progress on.

I turn to members’ specific points. On whether the economy should be identified more clearly, I think that it should—it is in my job title that I am cabinet secretary for the economy. Economic growth has been identified as one of the First Minister’s four priorities. The review happened as I went on maternity leave and some of the changes happened when I was out of government, but there is absolutely no doubt that John Swinney’s Government believes in economic growth, and economic growth for a purpose. That prosperity needs to be shared as fairly as possible, which is why I have some sympathy with Daniel Johnson, who set out why economic growth per head of population is a good measure.

Michelle Thomson asked a number of questions about the extent to which the national performance framework informs discussions in Cabinet, its actual use, and how we collect data. Those are

good questions to start our conversation on what should replace the national performance framework and how we can embed the UN sustainable development goals so that they become a useful tool and a useful aim.

Pam Gosal set out some objectives that we should be very serious about addressing, and tackling gender inequality and domestic abuse are obvious examples of those. People across the country have lived experience of those things, and there are questions about justice. At the end of the day, irrespective of which shiny framework we have to measure our progress, we have to listen to those whose experience is anything but fair or just.

On Alex Rowley’s point, I believe that the biggest societal changes have not come out of tick-box exercises. Transformation has come from a focus on delivering the change that we need in partnership with people and through treating people as equals. It is a lot easier to do that if we have a framework that everyone can get behind, because the framework identifies where the money should be spent and the most effective policies for delivering it. If there is anything that we need to hear more of in Scotland, it is frank, open debate in civic Scotland—that is, outside Parliament—on the big policy changes that will make the biggest impacts.

I am afraid that I do not know how much time I have left. I will calculate it quickly. I had six minutes, so I have 45 seconds left.

Ben Macpherson’s point hit the nail on its head. He identified that what leads to long-term change is having a number of shared outcomes that we can all get behind. When I sat on the sustainable growth commission a number of years ago, it came through loud and clear from comparable countries that had delivered the biggest change, particularly related to economic prosperity, that they had looked at a period of 25 years. That meant that, irrespective of who was in government, there was a shared perspective on what would lead to the biggest change, and stakeholders could rely on the Government to deliver those changes irrespective of who was in it. Ben Macpherson was absolutely right, and he identified precisely why. We need a framework and clear goals to get behind, and that is what we propose to have.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): I invite Michael Marra to wind up the debate on behalf of the Finance and Public Administration Committee.

16:53

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): I am pleased to close the debate as the deputy convener of the Finance and Public Administration

Committee. I thank members for their participation and our outstanding clerking team for their preparation of the report.

The sense that I got from colleagues was that if we are to have a framework, we should know how we can make it work better. The Deputy First Minister set out in her opening and closing remarks that she intends to start again with the process. I hope that she takes note of the many observations and of the evidence that the committee has taken in recent months, and that she intends to take into account the contributions that colleagues have made today.

I will outline a bit of that evidence and then reflect on some of the debate that we have heard.

As part of our investigation, the committee heard from the Scottish Government and said that we would welcome the commitment to produce what was to be an implementation plan—I am not exactly clear on the status of that plan, given the Deputy First Minister’s pledge to “start again”. However, the idea of marrying the national outcomes with a clear path to implementation was very much part of the committee’s considerations, and I hope that the Government will take that on board.

In the evidence that we received were insights into what the implementation plan could look like. There were some suggestions about the use of clear, time-bound targets and indicators for each national outcome, a strong communication strategy to ensure that outcomes are more widely known, and a clear outline of how the outcomes both support and are in tension with each other—a suggestion that came through in much of the evidence. We have urged the Scottish Government to reflect those recommendations as clearly as it can.

We also heard much—as has been reflected in the debate—about the use of data gathered from the national indicators, and how they might be used both to assess past performance and to inform future decision making. We have therefore recommended that the plan set out how data should be used to inform decision making as that will be absolutely critical if that kind of tool is to work.

A significant amount of the evidence that we received reflected on whether the national performance framework was clearly visible in the decision-making processes undertaken by the Government. There is a concern, which was reflected in many of the contributions today, that its visibility has reduced in the Government’s work—for instance, in the interaction and relationship between the national outcomes and the four key priorities identified by the First Minister. I detect a great amount of tension there,

which was also outlined by the Deputy First Minister.

Witnesses described the Scottish Government’s commitment to this kind of tool as being “patchy” and “mixed”, and they raised concerns about the prominence of the framework and how that had declined since 2007.

It is clear from the debate that visibility is important, from Ben Macpherson bravely raising the national performance framework with people on Leith Walk when they are on their way home from a hard day at work to Craig Hoy raising it in the pub. I can assure Craig Hoy that in the Tay Bridge Bar in Dundee we speak of little else.

There is a real challenge as to whether we see the framework as a vehicle for change or a tool that can be used. The Deputy First Minister is keen to say that that kind of tool should set out the kind of country that we want Scotland to be. The issue of broad unanimity and the idea of a shared aspiration that we can discipline Government on, and on which we can share priorities across political lines, is perhaps the fault line that underpins much of these issues.

It is right to raise in this context the, I think, frankly much-abused Christie commission report, because that probably talks to a point at which there was a form of political unanimity about breaking silos by making sure that we put outcomes above inputs. On that basis, it is clear that if this was the tool that was meant to allow us to achieve that, it has not worked. When members raised issues about measurement, they were absolutely clear on that.

Daniel Johnson was right to set out the tougher measures of gross domestic product per head and the Gini coefficients and the ways by which we understand whether progress is being made. In recent work in Estonia, the Finance and Public Administration Committee was introduced to something called the tree of truth. If I am honest, that might be open to a bit of scorn in Scotland as to how it is presented, but it is a tool that tries to do much of what we are debating here, which is to try to understand whether the public feel that progress is being made. I commend it to the Deputy First Minister as an example of a tool that could be used in that regard.

The core issue in the debate is the distance between political intent and organisational principle. In essence, is what we are talking about where we want to go or how we want to get there? I understand the Deputy First Minister describing how we want to use such a tool to discipline Government and the civil service to focus them on collective aims, but Alex Rowley was very clear that the operation of such a tool in Fife was a box-ticking exercise, which is literally what it became. It

had no real impact on the lives of the people in Fife whom he has served for decades. That should be a concern to anybody developing a new tool in this space. We should not allow it to become more of that.

Michelle Thomson talked eloquently about whether we are setting an ambition and where we are headed together; other members used the phrase “north star”. There is a question as to whether the journey and the direction are as important as what might be achieved if we are never to reach a final shared destination, and that was very well put.

Crucially, Michelle Thomson’s contribution also touched on what we might have thought of, just a few years or even months ago, as unalienable and self-evident truths about what is solid and reasonable, whether it is democracy or security in Europe. When all that is solid melts into air, we face significant problems, and the tool of the national performance framework alone is perhaps not going to help us to reach our destination.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate on the national performance framework—review of national outcomes.

Business Motion

17:00

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-16027, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a business programme.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees—

(a) the following programme of business—

Tuesday 14 January 2025

2.00 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Topical Questions (if selected)

followed by Ministerial Statement: Winter Heating Payment

followed by Scottish Government Debate: Valuing Culture: Scotland’s Support to the Culture Sector

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: Inquiry into the A9
Dualling Programme

followed by Business Motions
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 5.00 pm Decision Time
followed by Members' Business
 Tuesday 21 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 22 January 2025
 2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 2.00 pm Portfolio Questions:
 Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands;
 Health and Social Care
followed by Scottish Conservative and Unionist
 Party Business
followed by Business Motions
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
followed by Approval of SSIs (if required)
 5.10 pm Decision Time
followed by Members' Business
 Thursday 23 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:
 Social Justice
followed by Stage 3 Proceedings: Welfare of Dogs
 (Scotland) Bill
followed by Business Motions
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 5.00 pm Decision Time

(b) that, for the purposes of Portfolio Questions in the week beginning 13 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.—[*Jamie Hepburn*]

Motion agreed to.

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

17:01

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-16028 and S6M-16029, on approval of Scottish statutory instruments.

Motions moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the Burial (Management) (Scotland) Regulations 2025 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Burial and Cremation (Inspection) (Scotland) Regulations 2025 [draft] be approved.—[*Jamie Hepburn*]

The Presiding Officer: The question on those motions will be put at decision time.

Decision Time

17:01

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): There are two questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that motion S6M-15708, in the name of Kenneth Gibson, on behalf of the Finance and Public Administration Committee, on the national performance framework—review of national outcomes, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament notes the findings and recommendations in the Finance and Public Administration Committee's 10th Report, 2024 (Session 6), *Report on the National Performance Framework: Review of National Outcomes* (SP Paper 685), and the responses from other committees, as referenced in annexe B to the report.

The Presiding Officer: If no member objects, I propose to ask a single question on two Parliamentary Bureau motions.

As no member has objected, the final question is, that motions S6M-16028 and S6M-16029, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on approval of Scottish statutory instruments, be agreed to.

Motions agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the Burial (Management) (Scotland) Regulations 2025 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Burial and Cremation (Inspection) (Scotland) Regulations 2025 [draft] be approved.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

St Mirren and University of the West of Scotland Partnership

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-14331, in the name of George Adam, on St Mirren announcing its landmark partnership with the University of the West of Scotland. The debate will be concluded without any question being put. I invite members who wish to participate to press their request-to-speak buttons.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament congratulates St Mirren on its landmark partnership with the University of the West of Scotland (UWS); understands this partnership will enable the two Paisley-based institutions to work together to develop the relationship between sport and academia in Scotland, enriching the learning and research opportunities available to UWS students and staff and supporting St Mirren to improve standards across all facets of the club; praises St Mirren on its commitment to Paisley and the community, and acknowledges what it sees as the excellent example that it sets as a fan-owned community-focused football club.

17:03

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): Deputy Presiding Officer, no one will be surprised that my first members' business debate as I return to the back benches is focused on Paisley and St Mirren—two of the three great loves of my life. I am going to shock you some more—and shock everyone—with a quote from a Labour councillor. This was said some time ago, at one of the many dramatic moments in the history of St Mirren Football Club. He said:

“Paisley is St Mirren and St Mirren is Paisley”,

and that is as true now as it was then. The club has served the people of Paisley since its inception in 1877, and it is a major part of our town's past and will be important in the future, too.

For me and for countless buddies, the club is not just a team—it is a way of life. It is the black-and-white stripes, and it has brought us moments of unbridled joy and pride. It is the roar of the crowd at what was once Love Street and is now the SMISA—St Mirren Independent Supporters Association—stadium. It is the history that we cherish: lifting the Scottish cup in 1987, winning the league cup in 2013 and surviving against the odds, time and time again—and that is just during my lifetime.

Countless generations have been there before me and felt the sadness, fear and unbridled joy of being a St Mirren supporter. Members will be aware of the importance of the football team to me and my wife, Stacey, and our family. So many key

parts of our life are intertwined with St Mirren, both on and off the park. There was a time when we won the championship in 2000—the millennial season in the old first division—and we were in a pub celebrating among all the St Mirren supporters. I got up on the karaoke and started singing “Angels”. At this point, Stacey instantly thought, “Here he goes again—big romantic that he is, he’s going to be singing that to me.” Most of the time, as we all know, I will direct that towards Stacey, but this one time, I finished the song with, “I’m loving St Mirren instead.” I have never heard the end of that, but here we are, in 2025, and things are still going strong.

That is because St Mirren is about more than just football—it is an integral part of Paisley and is a symbol of our community spirit and determination to succeed. When the fan-led buy-out took place, I was immensely proud to support that effort. It was about not just ownership, but empowerment and putting the future of our beloved club in the hands of the people who truly care for it. That buy-out laid the foundation for the success that we see today, both on and off the pitch.

However, today’s debate is about not just one Paisley institution, but two. The other one has also been a part of the town for a very long time. What was then called the Paisley College of Technology opened its door in 1897, becoming the University of Paisley in 1992 and finally the University of the West of Scotland in 2007. Both club and university have served their town for a very long time, and this debate is about a collaboration that resonates deeply with the heart of Paisley—a partnership that embodies our town’s values of community, ambition and resilience.

Now, through the partnership with UWS, St Mirren is taking its commitment to our community to new heights. The University of the West of Scotland is another cornerstone of our town—a world-class institution that is shaping the future of our young people. Together, those two pillars of our town are creating opportunities that will resonate far beyond football. Since the partnership began, more than 30 UWS students have gained invaluable experience with St Mirren. From coaching and sports science to media and journalism, they have had the chance to apply their skills in a professional setting. The partnership is about not just work experience or a work placement, but equipping our young people with the tools that they need to succeed, while strengthening St Mirren’s operations across the board.

One of the exciting aspects of the collaboration is its focus on youth development. Thanks to UWS’s cutting-edge research, the club’s youth academy players are benefiting from innovative

approaches that go beyond football. Mental resilience, psychological strength and character development are now at the heart of the St Mirren training programme, which is creating not just great players, but great people, too.

The partnership is also testament to the role that our institutions play in the life of our town. As I said, St Mirren and UWS are not just organisations—they are symbols of Paisley’s identity. They bring people together, create opportunities and showcase the town on a national and international stage. The collaboration underscores what we can achieve when we work together and invest in our young people, and when we believe in the power of community.

As part of the partnership programme that I mentioned earlier—fleetingly—UWS is expanding its reach by bringing journalism students into the fold to enhance St Mirren’s media activities. The collaboration is ensuring that every corner of the club, from the men’s and women’s first teams to the youth academy, benefits from the skills and dedication of Paisley’s future professionals.

The partnership is also a reminder of the role that St Mirren and UWS play in our town. They bring people together, create opportunities and elevate Paisley on the map. Whether it is the roar of the crowd at the SMISA stadium or the hum of activity at the UWS campus, those institutions feed our collective pride and ambition. As Paisley’s MSP, I see at first hand the importance of investing in such partnerships; they show what we can achieve when we trust in our community and its potential. For Paisley, it is more than a collaboration—it is a celebration of who we are and what we can accomplish together.

Today, I ask members in the chamber to join me in applauding the partnership, not just for what it represents now but for what it will bring in the years to come. It is partnerships such as this one that will ensure the success of our town, our people and our institutions. Together, we are building a more positive Paisley and investing in our young people’s future.

UWS and St Mirren are demonstrating what I believe to be the key parts of being a Paisley boddie: a belief in community, ambition, resilience and pride. Those are Paisley’s values, and the agreement between the two institutions embodies that. Let us here, today, take those values as they are and ensure that the great town of Paisley continues to be the remarkable place that it is. *[Applause.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Adam. We move to the open debate.

17:10

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): I congratulate George Adam on bringing the debate to the chamber. I know that this really sticks in his craw, but I, too, have a connection with St Mirren, because I used to coach there. I remember Mr Adam's dismay when he discovered not only that I was a Tory, but that I used to coach at his beloved St Mirren.

I also remember when he decided that he was going to introduce me to the legend that is Jimmy Bone, only to find out that it was Jimmy who had brought me to St Mirren in the first place. I have chuckled about that long and hard. I also have to tell Mr Adam that I have a connection with UWS in Paisley, because my daughter is a graduate of the institution, so I am very pleased to be able to contribute to the debate.

When I came to St Mirren in the 1990s, I found it interesting that the training methodology in football at that time was archaic. It was based on what had been learned from the previous manager, the manager before that and so on, and there was no real structure for a physiological approach. As we know, sport has moved on so much, especially in Europe, and the partnership between St Mirren and Paisley is, to me, the embodiment of how communities should work.

As Mr Adam has alluded to many times in the chamber, St Mirren Football Club is the centre of the community, and that is true for many football clubs across Scotland, especially those that I would class as the minor clubs outside, say, Rangers and Celtic—

Members: Oh!

Brian Whittle: Thank you.

I am thinking about the ability of those clubs to reach into a community in a way that statutory services cannot. I am well aware of some of the work that is done across Scotland. For example, Heart of Midlothian brings men into the changing room to talk about mental health, and I know that many clubs bring in their local communities to participate in initiatives relating to health and nutrition. They are reaching people in ways that statutory services cannot. The collaboration between UWS and St Mirren has massive potential to reach far into the community.

A while back, I was a member of a couple of parliamentary committees that brought in the Scottish Football Association to give evidence because we were worried about what it was doing with youth in Scotland and the way in which it was treating young people. From what I gather, there is potential for UWS to have a positive impact on mental health and psychological resilience, which would address the concerns that were raised at

that time in the Health and Sport Committee and the Public Petitions Committee—Mr Adam and I both sat on the Health and Sport Committee—about the way in which football was treating our youth.

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): Anything to do with football is dangerous territory for me to involve myself in, but when I chaired the Health and Sport Committee many moons ago, there were concerns about representatives from Premiership clubs going to young children's football matches and promising them the earth—of course, they were discarded later on. Can you advise whether the situation in that regard has moved on, so that we do not have that happening to young boys and girls who may be let down?

Brian Whittle: That is good timing from my colleague, because we are currently considering whether to revisit the issue in committee to see whether anything has moved on. Since I was on the relevant committees, I now have two grandchildren who are currently with Premiership clubs, at 12 years old, and I am very well aware of how they are being treated. It seems to me that the situation has improved somewhat over the piece, but it would be interesting—and I would be keen—to see how the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee might revisit the issue and what might come out on the back of that.

Back then, we heard in committee that the SFA would gather as many players as it could into its youth academy, and then just cut them, as Christine Grahame said. Promising young people the earth and then just cutting them off can cause mental health problems. The collaboration between UWS and St Mirren is therefore a fantastic way forward, and a way in which we can look after the youngsters—the academy players—in the club.

I see that I am running well over my time, Deputy Presiding Officer. I say to Mr Adam that I will watch with interest to see how the collaboration goes forward, and I hope that it can potentially become a blueprint for the way in which other clubs can take their youth academies forward.

17:15

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): I congratulate my friend and colleague, and fellow St Mirren supporter, George Adam, on securing the debate. I say to Christine Grahame that, although she might not know a lot about football, she would still make the Morton first team. [*Laughter.*] If anyone has not seen the team's DVD, "Morton: 100 Great Throw-ins", it is well worth watching.

It is great to see how the people of Paisley have warmed to Johnstone boy George and taken him to their hearts—I am sorry that I had to reveal that. As someone who was born in Paisley, I am, of course, delighted to speak in this debate on the co-operation between two historic Paisley institutions: the University of the West of Scotland and St Mirren Football Club.

I have often highlighted, in my contributions in the Parliament and in meetings of the cross-party group on life sciences, the importance of innovation and education reinforcing each other. On a personal note, my son Ross was a student at UWS and graduated with a first in chemistry only three years ago.

The new memorandum of understanding between St Mirren and UWS is a real-world example of promoting student engagement with industry by offering unique hands-on learning experiences that will prepare students for careers in sport and beyond. I am sure that many students will relish the opportunity to gain experience in working at a Scottish Premiership club—I certainly would have done during my time as a student.

Through the partnership, the club will fund two research projects: one will evaluate the recent psychosocial player development programme, and the other will focus on providing long-term personalised support to the St Mirren academy staff in delivering the programme. The saints will benefit from the academic expertise and resources of UWS, which will help to enhance the quality of their football operations and business infrastructure.

George Adam's motion highlights that the initiative is the by-product of having a football club that is anchored in its local community and directly owned by its supporters. It is similar to the very successful model that operates in German professional football, where—despite some notable loopholes—most clubs are majority owned by their members. The St Mirren Independent Supporters Association has been the majority 51 per cent owner of St Mirren FC since 2021, thus ensuring that the club is kept in the hands of the people who care for it most: the loyal buddies supporters.

I recognise George Adam's work and years of dedication as chair of SMISA between 2015 and 2022, when his relentless and assiduous dedication helped the club to move to fan ownership. The process was assisted by Supporters Direct, which has worked throughout the United Kingdom since 2000 to help fans to gain club ownership, and which was instrumental in informing saints fans during the takeover of St Mirren.

In the three seasons since the takeover, the club has not only been successful on the pitch but has seen its highest average attendances this century, with numbers having gradually increased to 7,665 this season. That proves that having a club that operates for the benefit of supporters does not have to come at the expense of financial and sporting success. It is great to hear the team sheet read out at home games—unlike at Morton matches, where they read out the names of the supporters who have turned up.

Being fan owned does not equal fan run, and St Mirren is still run by the club's board and management. Too many professional football clubs are now distant multimillion-pound brands that prioritise short-term success while often pricing out the communities in which they operate. However, St Mirren, Motherwell and Hearts provide a powerful counterbalance to professional football as an arena in which only big money talks. The buddies' collaboration with local partners such as UWS will give the club an even stronger anchoring in Paisley, in line with the supporters association's aim to safeguard the club's place at the heart of the Paisley community.

That is reinforced by work that was carried out in partnership with the children's charity and leading social enterprise, Kibble Education and Care Centre, which owns a 27.5 per cent stake in the club. Kibble provides a range of integrated services to support vulnerable children and young people in Paisley and beyond.

I welcome the co-operation agreement between UWS and St Mirren.

Finally, I should highlight some further trophies that St Mirren have won, which were not mentioned by George. They won the 1922 Barcelona tournament, only three years after winning the victory cup in 1919. They also won the Anglo-Scottish cup in 1918, and we should not forget their Scottish cup victories in 1926 and 1959.

The partnership between UWS and St Mirren, along with the involvement of Kibble, undoubtedly strengthens the club's ties to the local community for the years and decades ahead and contributes to the saints once again bringing football trophies to Paisley.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Gibson—I suspect that Morton will be writing to the Presiding Officer to demand a right to reply.

17:20

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): I welcome the opportunity to speak in this debate and thank George Adam for securing it. I also thank the

University of the West of Scotland for its helpful briefing ahead of it.

As has been said, St Mirren Football Club and the University of the West of Scotland are two of Paisley's greatest institutions. It is important that we celebrate their efforts in working together, and I join Mr Adam, Mr Whittle and Mr Gibson in congratulating them on this new and exciting partnership, which looks to combine the best aspects of sport and education through understanding and learning. It gives students the best opportunity to fully appreciate how a top-flight professional football team is run and allows St Mirren to fully utilise the university's significant and valuable expertise to develop as a club.

Since the partnership was announced in September, 30 students have been on placement at the club. They have had the opportunity to observe the coaches and staff in action and, as a result, have had direct access to ask questions and learn from professionals at the top of their game.

As we have heard, journalism students from the university have been supporting the club's media activities across the men's and women's first teams, as well as the academy teams. That has noticeably improved the club's capacity and social media reach, as, with the students' assistance, all teams are able to be covered.

I have been pleased to meet St Mirren's chief operating officer, Keith Lasley, on a number of occasions over the past year, and I commend him and his team for their leadership as well as their commitment to the local community, building on the excellent work of his predecessor and club ambassador, Tony Fitzpatrick.

St Mirren is, of course, fan owned, and it is clear that, over the past few years, it has made a real attempt to enhance its connection with the people of Paisley and Renfrewshire. There are many great examples of that. Early last year, I met volunteers including Jim Crawford, Ian McLaren and others at St Mirren park who are part of the buddie bin it campaign, which aims to reduce the club's carbon footprint by recycling waste and making the stadium lighting as energy efficient as possible.

Moreover, since 2009, St Mirren has run a free youth programme called street stuff alongside Renfrewshire Council, Police Scotland, the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service and Engage Renfrewshire. The activities include multisports gaming, and statistics show that, in the areas visited by the programme, there has been a sustained reduction of up to 65 per cent in youth disorder and antisocial behaviour.

Last summer, I had the opportunity to visit the University of the West of Scotland's Paisley

campus with my colleague Alison Taylor MP. We met the principal and vice-chancellor, Professor James Miller, and heard about the institution's positive impact on Paisley and beyond, and I commend him and his team for their leadership and commitment to the community. It was also fantastic to hear last month that the university is celebrating its highest ever number of sport scholarships, with 37 people receiving tailored support to achieve success in their chosen fields. The partnership with a Scottish premiership side will only enhance a sport department that is already excelling.

I am delighted to have this opportunity to celebrate the partnership alongside colleagues today. I do not know whether this is a consequence of the fact that Mr Whittle is no longer doing the training, but it is fair to say that St Mirren is a team that is on the up, having secured European football for the first time in 37 years and consecutive top six finishes in the past two seasons.

However, the club's work off the pitch is equally impressive. The partnership with the University of the West of Scotland is an exciting development, and I wish both institutions all the best with it in the future.

17:24

The Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport (Maree Todd): I thank everyone who has contributed to this afternoon's debate. Of course, I thank George Adam very much for reminding us of two of his three great loves—St Mirren and Paisley.

This has been a wonderful debate. Every time we debate football here, what comes across clearly is just how much football means to us as a nation. Members have spoken with passion about local clubs in communities up and down the country. They have spoken mainly about St Mirren—there was a little chat about Morton, but I am not sure I should raise that again in the closing speech.

We have heard a lot about the positive impact that St Mirren has on the surrounding area and about the positive outcomes of its partnership with the University of the West of Scotland. I cannot add much to what we have already heard about that partnership, but I make absolutely clear my support for George Adam's motion and I commend St Mirren football club for its commitment to supporting the local community and UWS for recognising the value of community clubs and the opportunities that they provide.

We have heard contributions from across the chamber. Nelson Mandela articulated and recognised the power of sport to bring people

together, but who would have thought that our Tory colleague Brian Whittle had quite so much in common with George Adam? There has been plenty of light-hearted fun and reminiscence, but it will be absolutely clear to anyone who is listening that the club and the university are at the heart of their community and are serving it well.

Unless they are focusing on matches, the headlines that we see regarding football often cover a side of it that we do not want to see and speak of disorder, violence and pyrotechnics, but that is not representative of our national game. Football is a sport that brings communities together and provides opportunities for people of all ages, abilities and conditions to participate, as well as using its reach to deliver so much more. There are more than 2,500 football clubs in communities across Scotland, with 150,000 registered players and a further 50,000 coaches and volunteers. If we include the number of recreational participants, parents, fans and influencers in the local community, the Scottish FA has estimated that football clubs impact more than 900,000 people every week—900,000 people in a country of about 5.5 million.

The unique reach of football offers a platform and an incredible opportunity to influence and develop Scottish society. It impacts a wide number of key thematic areas, both on and off the pitch, and the Scottish Government absolutely recognises that. Scottish football has a real track record of supporting national and local priorities through a wide range of projects and programmes, such as the cashback for communities programme, which supports young people who are at risk of entering the criminal justice system. Football works in communities most affected by crime through sports projects and employability support. It supports mental health and those with dementia through the football memories project, which now has almost 400 groups and 4,000 participants every week. The changing room and changing room extra time programmes delivered by Scottish Action for Mental Health aim to bring men together through the power of football and provide a safe space for them to talk about their mental wellbeing.

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): Does the minister also recognise the work of Motherwell Football Club Community Trust in that aspect and the support that the football team has given to suicide prevention, particularly in my area? I declare an interest as a member of the Well Society and as someone who has been around to see her team win the Scottish cup.

Maree Todd: I could not agree more. Football clubs are doing powerful work through the length and breadth of the country and the changing room is a perfect example. It is a 12-week programme

that uses football to bring men together to tackle mental ill-health. The extra time programme gives people the opportunity to talk in more depth about their mental wellbeing and to come together to explore areas of particular challenge or concern. The changing room for women, which was launched recently, is a 12-month pilot programme in partnership with the Hibernian Community Foundation and Big Hearts Community Trust. Football fans in training is one of Europe's most successful health intervention programmes. It was created by the University of Glasgow, is supported and funded by the Scottish Government and has been proven to have a positive, long-term impact on health and wellbeing. The programme has been running for more than 13 years and is the SPFL Trust's flagship health and wellbeing programme, with almost 8,000 people having taken part in that time.

This year, we saw a doubling of the investment in extra time, which is an out-of-school childcare programme, run in partnership with the SFA, that will bolster the provision of after-school and holiday club activities for children of primary school age across Scotland. The partnership was launched with the Scottish Government last year and was designed to increase the availability of childcare services while encouraging children to engage in sport and physical activity. By giving thousands of children each week access to sport and other activities outwith normal hours, the £4 million of funding, divided across the 31 participating football clubs and trusts, will help parents and carers to find employment and training opportunities.

On a recent visit to Hampden, I was absolutely delighted to meet representatives from the St Mirren FC Charitable Foundation to learn about the extra time project and to hear directly from them about the powerful impact that their work is having on their community. It was so clear from speaking to them that they knew their community well—they almost knew the children's names—and it was really powerful to hear about the impact that that programme is having on the community.

Those are examples of projects and programmes that have been recognised by national and international partners as best practice, with a reach that goes far beyond the traditional sporting boundaries.

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): Does the minister recognise the European Football for Development Network, of which Greenock Morton Football Club is a member, which helps to promote clubs across the European continent, particularly some of the smaller clubs, which then mix with some of the major players such as Bayern Munich, Juventus and Manchester United?

Maree Todd: I am very happy to recognise it. Scotland has some of the best community football clubs in Europe—organisations that are deeply rooted in their communities and help to support players, coaches, volunteers and parents. The role of such clubs in our society is fundamental and can often be the glue to connect communities far beyond other statutory and non-statutory organisations. The breadth and diversity of the communities that those clubs serve is considerable. Many—including St Mirren, as we have heard today—operate in areas of significant deprivation. Where football can and does play a key role, the challenges for Government are in the move from reactive to preventative healthcare. Those challenges include tackling the social issues of obesity; more people suffering from mental health issues; providing support for and empowerment of local communities—fan ownership of St Mirren is a fantastic example of community empowerment—development of long-term sustainable models to reduce pressure on the public purse; and addressing inequalities and the increased cost of living.

Today's debate was focused on the excellent work of St Mirren in partnering with the University of the West of Scotland. I again commend that work, but let us also recognise that, up and down the country, football clubs are providing key services and support to their local communities. That is not the stuff that makes the headlines, but it is absolutely right that Parliament recognises and acknowledges the incredible value in it.

I could not put it better than to quote the words of George Adam. Such collaboration fuels

“our collective pride and ambition ... it is a celebration of who we are and what we can accomplish together.”

For that, I am immensely grateful.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, minister, and thank you, Mr McMillan, for providing Morton with the right to reply. That concludes the debate.

Meeting closed at 17:33.

This is the final edition of the *Official Report* for this meeting. It is part of the Scottish Parliament *Official Report* archive and has been sent for legal deposit.

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