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Scottish Parliament

Thursday 20 March 2025

[The Presiding Officer opened the meeting at 11:40]

General Question Time

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Good morning. The first item of business is general question time.

Newburgh (Rail Station)

1. **Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green):** To ask the Scottish Government when it will conclude its assessment of the case for a new rail station at Newburgh. (S6O-04458)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): My officials continue to work collaboratively with the South East of Scotland Transport Partnership, which is leading on the Newburgh transport appraisal, and its partner, the Newburgh train station group, and are actively reviewing the latest documents received from SEStran on that. The appraisal involves consideration of a range of multimodal options, including the option of a new station at Newburgh. I have also made clear to my officials that I would like their advice before the end of May, as I understand that the work has been on-going for some time, with Scottish Government support and funding.

Mark Ruskell: I know that the case that has been submitted to Transport Scotland makes a compelling argument for the economic transformation not just of Newburgh but of Abernethy and the surrounding area. However, I feel that the cabinet secretary and officials will fully understand that economic opportunity only if they come to Newburgh and meet people and businesses to understand their vision for economic transformation for the area.

The cabinet secretary will be aware that Willie Rennie, Claire Baker, Murdo Fraser and I wrote to her this week to invite her to Newburgh. I reiterate that invitation and ask the cabinet secretary whether she will consider coming to Newburgh before a decision is made, which, on the basis of her first answer, appears will happen in May.

Fiona Hyslop: I appreciate the local community's efforts in assisting SEStran with its transport appraisal for Newburgh. As I have said, the appraisal involves consideration of a range of multimodal options, including the option of a new station at Newburgh. The context of places is important in those considerations. The next stage

would be the business case, and strategic economic and social aspects would be built in to that, if there were a recommendation to proceed.

I reassure Mark Ruskell that I am aware of the reasoning behind the invitation from him and other local MSPs, and I would be delighted to accept that invitation to visit Newburgh, as diaries allow.

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): One of the arguments made by the successful campaign for Levenmouth was the economic boost that it would bring to the local area. A similar case can be made for Newburgh. How is the Scottish Government evaluating the benefits that have been brought to Levenmouth and using that to inform the case for and its understanding of Newburgh?

Fiona Hyslop: We must receive the appraisal from SEStran. It provided additional information as recently as December, and part of the assessment work involves looking at the additional documents.

In relation to the stages, including moving from appraisal under the Scottish transport appraisal guidance to the business case, any lessons learned from elsewhere will inform decision making. However, that decision making must be based on what is put in front of officials and recommended to me, based on the merits of the case in and of itself.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): I am delighted that the cabinet secretary is coming to Newburgh on the banks of the Tay. It is a beautiful setting, and the only thing missing is a train station. Therefore, I hope that she agrees positively to the recommendation; indeed, the community is behind it. Given that the option has been considered as part of the budget process, will she give special consideration to having a station at Newburgh and be open to making it happen?

Fiona Hyslop: I recognise Willie Rennie's enthusiasm for and long-time support of a station at Newburgh as the constituency MSP. I will not second guess what recommendations will be made to me, but I look forward to a visit to the most beautiful part of Fife—in his consideration, I suspect; I see from other members that there might be competition—and I fully understand the economic, social and wider need.

Rail Travel (Companions of Blind Persons National Entitlement Card Holders)

2. **Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what the estimated cost would be of permanently extending free rail travel to companions of blind persons national entitlement card holders, in light of the campaigning by Sight Scotland and Deafblind Scotland. (S6O-04459)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): One of our aims for a publicly owned ScotRail is to make rail travel more accessible to more people. Following representations from Sight Scotland, Deafblind Scotland and MSPs from different parties, I am pleased to announce that, on 1 April, we will launch a 12-month pilot programme providing free travel to companions of blind concessionary card holders on all ScotRail services.

ScotRail will meet the costs associated with the pilot from its existing budget, and Transport Scotland, working with ScotRail, will monitor and evaluate the impact of the pilot to inform the next steps. At that point, they should be able to identify the costs of providing that service on a permanent basis.

Rona Mackay: It is highly encouraging to witness the expansion to companions and the Government's dedication to enhancing accessibility in Scotland's public transportation system. Can the minister confirm when she will next meet Transport Scotland and ScotRail to discuss those plans and any next steps?

Fiona Hyslop: I meet my officials at Transport Scotland and ScotRail regularly, and they will be monitoring the impacts of the initiative and keeping me informed of progress over the next 12 months. We all want it to succeed in making travel more affordable and accessible to blind and visually impaired people. I hope that MSPs across the chamber will help promote it locally, too.

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): The cabinet secretary knows that I have been campaigning for this for years, so I am delighted that there will be a pilot. Does she agree that we do not want the pilot to end suddenly and for a gap to arise as a result? Will there be constant evaluation of the pilot to ensure that, if it is a success, it will just continue?

Fiona Hyslop: I want to put on record the efforts of Graham Simpson MSP in pursuing this issue for some time now. I am sure that he will share in the success of the pilot and help promote it locally.

Transport Scotland will monitor and evaluate the pilot over the next 12 months and report conclusions to ministers. Sight Scotland has engaged with blind and visually impaired people through survey and focus groups to support evaluation.

I should say that this is not just about cost; we will also look at how the free travel is used. That qualitative information will be important, too.

Aberdeen City Region Deal

3. Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how it plans to build on the reported successes of the Aberdeen city region deal, which is due to conclude its 10-year plan next year. (S6O-04460)

The Minister for Employment and Investment (Tom Arthur): The Scottish Government's £125 million investment in the Aberdeen city region deal is supporting the long-term development of the regional economy. The deal is delivering support to grow the energy, life sciences, and food and drink sectors, as well as delivering enhanced digital and transport infrastructure. We will build on that through our 10-year, £500 million just transition fund, as well as continuing to work towards delivering the Scottish Government's offshore wind hub in the north-east. All of that will support innovation in high-growth sectors, secure additional private investment, boost productivity and create high-quality jobs.

Jackie Dunbar: As recent reports suggest, Great British Energy still has no employees and United Kingdom Government funding for Acorn has yet to materialise. It is more important than ever for the Scottish Government to continue to invest in Aberdeen and the north-east. Can the minister say any more about the Scottish Government's plans to boost growth in the region through projects such as the offshore wind hub that he has just mentioned?

Tom Arthur: North-east business leaders wrote to the UK Government to set out the positive impacts of the Acorn project and the urgency of progressing it. We stand with them and continue to push the UK Government to commit to awarding track 2 status to Acorn and the Scottish cluster.

Our budget sets out a record £150 million of capital investment in offshore wind, as part of our commitment to invest up to £500 million over five years in the sector. We will also establish an offshore wind planning hub in the north-east to provide an additional route for industry to engage. That, alongside our 10-year just transition fund, will maximise the economic opportunities of our journey to net zero and create thousands of well-paid green jobs across Scotland.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): The 2016 Aberdeen city region deal included a promise from the Government of £200 million over 10 years to drastically speed up rail journey times to the central belt. However, the Government has covertly dropped "2026" from the project's title and only £16 million has been spent, with mere months to go. Why has it broken its promise and yet again betrayed the people of the north-east?

Tom Arthur: The significant investment that I outlined in my answers to Jackie Dunbar

demonstrates the Government's significant commitment to the people of the north-east and its significant investment across a range of areas.

On Mr Kerr's specific point, an outline business case for the wider Aberdeen route upgrade, including service improvements and route decarbonisation, was concluded, and it has been duly considered by Transport Scotland's investment decision board. A decision was made to progress the procurement of a replacement intercity train fleet as design works continue, the latter being fully funded this financial year. Options for progressing to the next stage of the Aberdeen to central belt service improvements remain under consideration.

The Presiding Officer: Question 4 was not lodged.

Disability Payments

5. James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what measures are being taken to mitigate any impact on disability payment recipients in Scotland of reported United Kingdom Government benefit reductions. (S6O-04462)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): The Scottish Government calls on the UK Government to recognise the anger and the real anxiety that it has caused disabled people right across the UK and to scrap the cruel reforms, which drastically reduce financial support for disabled people. As we were given no prior notice of the announcement and as we still await many of the details of the proposals, we will scrutinise what we can to understand the impacts on devolved disability benefits and on the people who rely on this support.

James Dornan: Does the cabinet secretary agree that the transfer of disability benefits to Social Security Scotland cannot come quickly enough, given the draconian policies that have been promoted by the current and previous Westminster Governments, and that, without Social Security Scotland, some of our most vulnerable citizens would be left without the support that they need? Does the cabinet secretary also agree that the behaviour of the two principal unionist parties towards the most vulnerable in our society highlights why we need independence—and soon?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: James Dornan is quite right on both counts. I reassure him that the case transfer process will be completed on time. All the estimations are that that part of the project is going very well. However, I share his deep concerns about the proposals that are coming forward—from a Labour Government. Whether or

not the proposals have been consulted on, there is real concern about their impact.

I will meet with disabled people's organisations this afternoon, and I have written to the secretary of state once again, asking for an urgent meeting and for the publication of the equality impact assessments. However, we must recognise that the changes that are being pushed through by the UK Labour Government will push more disabled people into poverty. This is austerity on the backs of some of the most vulnerable in our society.

Housing Emergency (Fife Council)

6. Annabelle Ewing (Cowdenbeath) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government when it last met the chief executive of Fife Council to discuss the housing emergency. (S6O-04463)

The Minister for Housing (Paul McLennan): The permanent secretary and the director of local government and housing met with the chief executive of Fife Council on 27 November 2024 to discuss the housing emergency, and I will meet with Councillor Hamilton in due course. In addition, Scottish Government officials meet with Fife Council officials regularly on a range of housing-related matters, including the housing emergency response.

Annabelle Ewing: I refer the minister to recent correspondence about a housing case that I have raised with Fife Council, which I copied the minister in to. In that case, which has, sadly, been going on for some years, the health visitor commented:

"I can categorically state that, in my 20 years of community nursing, of which 12 health visiting, I have never seen such living conditions and high level of environmental risk to children."

I ask the minister what has to happen, in 21st century Scotland, for this family to get a decent home.

Paul McLennan: I am aware of the case and we are engaging with Fife Council on the issue. The standard of temporary accommodation is important, which is why the Scottish Government published the temporary accommodation standards framework in 2023, to ensure that accommodation is of a high standard and that households receive the support services that meet their needs. Reducing the number of households—particularly households with children—in temporary accommodation and the time that they spend in it is a top priority for this Government.

Increasing housing supply is key to reducing homelessness, and we will continue to work with partners to deliver more affordable homes, the majority of which will be for social rent. Acquiring larger properties that are suitable for families will

help to reduce the number of households—including families with children—that are in temporary accommodation. Scottish Government funding of £42 million in 2024-25 will help to increase the supply of social housing of the right type and size where it is needed most.

The Presiding Officer: Before I call Meghan Gallacher for a brief supplementary question, I would be grateful if members entering the chamber could take their seats quickly and quietly.

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): Given the responses to amendments this morning at the Social Justice and Social Security Committee, I am not sure that what the minister says is quite accurate. Fife Council underspent its housing budget by almost £9 million this year, despite declaring a housing emergency a year ago. Included in that £9 million was £3.5 million for the property acquisition programme. Acquisition plays a key role in any council's housing approach, but it does not necessarily add properties to the overall stock. Will the minister engage with council officials to ensure that all levers are available to local government to prevent slippage? Will he also give an update on the roll-out of the planning hubs? We have not heard much about those since the Government's announcement.

Paul McLennan: On that particular point, during the first half of this session of Parliament, we made a record sum of funding—£120 million—available to Fife Council. This year, Fife Council's budget will increase from £26.2 million to £30.1 million, and those additional funds, which are the council's share of the national £40 million fund, are intended for the acquisition of properties. The purpose of acquiring properties and of the work that we are doing with Fife Council in relation to voids is to bring properties into circulation as soon as possible.

Deposit Return Scheme

7. Lorna Slater (Lothian) (Green): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the deposit return scheme, including whether it will be appointing a deposit management organisation on schedule in April 2025. (S6O-04464)

The Acting Minister for Climate Action (Alasdair Allan): The Scottish Government remains committed to delivering an interoperable deposit return scheme with England and Northern Ireland in 2027 and continues to move ahead with preparations. We have received an industry-backed application to run Scotland's DRS as well as the scheme in England and Northern Ireland.

We are currently assessing the application jointly with the United Kingdom Government and

Northern Ireland. As it will be an industry-run scheme, we must be assured that the applicant can deliver DRS and act on behalf of all businesses. Any appointment will be announced once the assessment concludes, which we expect to be in April.

Lorna Slater: In November 2024, the Welsh Government announced that it would include glass in its deposit return scheme. The regulations for Scotland's DRS, which were passed in 2020, include glass. Before the minister changes those regulations to undo the will of the Parliament and remove glass from Scotland's scheme, will he explain how Wales has been able to secure an exemption to the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020 in order to implement its own scheme, which includes glass, when Scotland has not?

Alasdair Allan: I realise the member's commitment to the issue. Her question is one that would be usefully addressed to the UK Government, as the matter is not a shining example of the usefulness to Scotland of the so-called UK internal market act, which has again prevented a devolved nation from moving forward with the deposit return scheme as intended. Urgent action is needed from the UK Government to repeal the internal market act and restore the full powers of devolved Parliaments, so that they might undertake useful schemes of that kind.

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP): Biffa is suing the Scottish ministers for a reputed sum of £160 million. Has the Scottish Government made, or will it make, any provision in its annual accounts for potential losses not only in that case but in cases of other major companies incurring costs of tens of millions of pounds due to faith in assurances that the former minister apparently made?

Alasdair Allan: As the member is well aware, it would be inappropriate for me to comment on live litigation—[*Interruption.*] I do not know why people find it unusual that ministers cannot comment on live litigation. However—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear the minister.

Alasdair Allan: However, I confirm to the member that we will deal with the question of the accounts as a contingent liability in line with our public finance rules and commitments.

Maurice Golden (North East Scotland) (Con): Since the disastrous collapse of the Scottish Government's last attempt at DRS, a UK-wide scheme is being planned and a Scottish Government circular economy strategy is being prepared, in addition to the extension of producer responsibility. Can the minister confirm that work is being carried out to assess the impact of those changes on local authorities with regard to jobs, finances and recycling services?

The Presiding Officer: Let us have a brief response, minister.

Alasdair Allan: Once appointed, the scheme administrator will work closely with stakeholders, including local government, to ensure that those questions are taken account of. It is worth saying that more than 50 countries around the world have similar schemes.

We all recognise the important contribution that such schemes can make to tackling problems such as littering and our carbon footprint in Scotland. I hope that all members will work together to ensure that the scheme is progressed, and I am sure that local authorities will be part of that.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes general questions.

First Minister's Question Time

12:00

Ferries

1. Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): Scotland should be able to build ferries here, in Scotland, to serve the islands of Scotland and to carry the people of Scotland, so why will seven new vessels for CalMac Ferries instead be built in Poland?

The First Minister (John Swinney): It is for the simple reason that a competitive tendering process was undertaken to ensure that we can deliver seven new vessels for some of the smaller routes that are part of the CalMac network. That process involved companies in Scotland and in other countries, as is consistent with the terms of the procurement legislation that the Government must follow.

Russell Findlay: Those vessels could and should have been built here, in Scotland. Ferguson Marine could and should be fit to win such contracts. For decades, before the Scottish National Party had anything to do with it, Ferguson Marine built ferries on budget and on time, but now, under the direct control of John Swinney's Government, it is unable to compete. Will the First Minister tell us, frankly, who is responsible for that?

The First Minister: The Scottish Government intervened when there was a risk that Ferguson's would cease trading on the Clyde. We arranged for new ownership to take the yard forward. The Government subsequently took decisions that led to significant orders being placed with Ferguson's following a competitive due process. We are in the process of concluding the small vessel replacement programme—we are in the 10-day standstill period, so I can give little detail to the Parliament on that process at the moment. Most recently, the Government has supported the work at Ferguson's through additional investment of up to £14.2 million in the yard in order to support it and guarantee its long-term future.

Russell Findlay: Two ferries with a £97 million price tag will end up costing taxpayers more than £400 million and entering service at least seven years late—

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Shona Robison): Now you are talking down the yard.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Let us hear Mr Findlay.

Russell Findlay: That all began with the contract that John Swinney personally approved

10 years ago. It was rushed through for one purpose, which was to promote the interests of the SNP—not the interests of islanders or taxpayers. The evidence shows that the entire process was rigged and that rules were repeatedly broken. There was not even a bog-standard financial guarantee to protect taxpayers. John Swinney personally signed off a process that was not just flawed but corrupt.

Members: Oh!

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear Mr Findlay.

Russell Findlay: After 10 years, Ferguson's is still dealing with the fallout. Does John Swinney accept that his actions a decade ago are causing Scottish shipyards to lose contracts to eastern Europe today?

The First Minister: No, I do not accept that in any way, shape or form. If the Government had not intervened and I had not taken actions when the yard faced difficulties, there would be people today who would not have had a livelihood for the best part of a decade. I know that that does not concern Russell Findlay much, because he represents a party that destroyed the industrial base of Scotland. That is what happened under the awful leadership of Conservative Governments in the United Kingdom. This Government is working with the workforce to make sure that we can secure the future of the yard.

At the heart of Russell Findlay's question is a complete contradiction because, on the one hand, he has accused the Government of rigging a process in the past—

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): Which you did.

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear the First Minister. I ask members who feel compelled to comment from their seats whether they are content that they are adhering to the requirements that they should be adhering to regarding their behaviour.

The First Minister: The Government is being accused of rigging the process on one occasion, and now the Government is being accused of not rigging the process to make sure that the contracts for the vessels can go to Ferguson's. That demonstrates that Russell Findlay is scraping the bottom of the barrel of political insults. He does it week after week in the Parliament, and it is a disgrace to the Conservative Party.

Russell Findlay: I am sorry, John, but we do not want the SNP to fix contracts for Ferguson's—

The Presiding Officer: Mr Findlay, I am sure that you know that we do not use only first names in the chamber.

Russell Findlay: Forgive me, Presiding Officer.

I am sorry, First Minister, but we do not want the SNP to fix contracts for Ferguson's; we want the SNP to fix Ferguson's so that it can win contracts fairly and squarely, because Scottish shipyards should be able to build ferries here, in Scotland.

After nationalisation, the SNP had a duty to get Ferguson's back into a position to win contracts legitimately, and it has failed to do so. SNP politicians want all the credit when they are grabbing headlines and launching a ferry with painted-on windows, but they never accept responsibility for what has gone wrong. The First Minister's fingerprints are all over the scandal from the very beginning. He signed off a dodgy deal that has let down islanders, taxpayers and shipyard workers, who face an uncertain future.

Scotland was once world leading in shipbuilding, and now we are losing CalMac ferry contracts to Poland. How can anyone trust John Swinney to repair the damage at Ferguson's when he caused it in the first place?

The First Minister: There would not be a Ferguson's yard trading just now if I had not intervened more than 10 years ago to try to secure the future of the yard. I make no apology for doing that over all those years.

I want to tell the Parliament what Russell Findlay really thinks, because he has not been straight with the Parliament in all his questions today. This is what Russell Findlay said before. He called Ferguson Marine

"a terrible drain on the public finances."

He called my Government's support

"recklessly throwing taxpayers' money away"—
[Interruption.]

The Presiding Officer: Members!

The First Minister: I am not finished yet—I have lots more to share with the Parliament today. He said that

"the non-stop squandering of cash cannot go on."

What we know today is that Russell Findlay has specialised in talking down the yard at Ferguson's. We know that he has come here today just to demonstrate the political opportunism that we hear from him every week. Furthermore, we know why he is doing it: it is because the Conservative Party is being hammered by Reform, and Russell Findlay is on his way out, along with most of his colleagues. Thank goodness, and good riddance to the lot of them.

Ferries

2. **Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab):** Scotland is a country renowned worldwide for its reputation for shipbuilding. For generations, we have been a leader in engineering, manufacturing and

craftsmanship. Why, therefore, does John Swinney think that Scotland is not capable of building its own ferries?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I think that Scotland is able to take forward its shipbuilding activities, and we have many examples of that being the case. The Government has intervened using our economic development powers and interventions to support that over a number of years. If it had not been for the actions of this Government and the actions that I took as a minister in the past, there would be no constancy of work at Ferguson Marine, and I make no apology for putting it in that direction.

Anas Sarwar: With the Scottish National Party, it is contracts going abroad. This week, it is jobs for Poland; four years ago, it was jobs for Turkey. So much for “Stronger for Scotland”; instead, it is “The SNP—Stronger for Poland” and “The SNP—Stronger for Turkey”.

I want the ferries to be built here in Scotland.—
[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear Mr Sarwar.

Anas Sarwar: I want the investment and the jobs to be here in Scotland. We have world-leading shipbuilders at Port Glasgow, Govan and Rosyth. We have a publicly owned shipbuilding company, Ferguson’s, and we have BAE Systems and Babcock. I want Scotland’s shipbuilders to be able to bid on and win the contracts, but John Swinney believes that none of them are good enough to build Scotland’s ferries.

What is it about the way that the SNP runs Ferguson’s and the way that the SNP does procurement that means that Scotland’s ferries cannot be built in Scotland?

The First Minister: I do not believe that any of the guff that Mr Sarwar has suggested is my view. Absolutely not—

The Presiding Officer: First Minister, let us ensure that our language is courteous and respectful.

The First Minister: Let me rephrase my point. I do not believe any of the nonsense that was purported by Mr Sarwar to be my view.

We have gone through a competitive tendering process, and Ferguson Marine was part of that competitive tendering process. It follows that I believe that that yard is perfectly able to build the ships, because it was part of the tendering process. It got through that tendering process and put in a bid that was credible and could be considered. Ministers cannot operate outside the law.

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): That was a separate process!

The Presiding Officer: Mr Marra.

The First Minister: We have got to follow the procurement law that is in place. We have got to follow the United Kingdom Subsidy Control Act 2022, which puts an obligation on all of us to make sure that ferry tenders are determined on the basis of an open procurement process.

I would love for the vessels to be built at Ferguson Marine—of course I would love that to be the case. That is why we are putting in £14.2 million over two years to support Ferguson Marine to develop its capability. I want that to be the case, but I have to make sure that we procure our ferry vessels in accordance with the legislation that is in place in the United Kingdom.

Anas Sarwar: John Swinney sends investment and jobs to Turkey and to Poland. People in Scotland will think that it is nonsense that he is not building ferries here in Scotland.

The consequence of SNP incompetence is stark. It is not just investment and jobs that are going abroad. At the heart of the matter are island communities that have been failed. Islanders are missing out on hospital appointments. They have missed weddings and loved ones’ funerals, and their livelihoods are being destroyed. The Fraser of Allander Institute estimates that disrupted ferry services cost the Isle of Arran alone up to £170,000 a day in lost revenue, which is devastating for an island.

In Uist, Stephen Peteranna, who is the managing director of a hotel group that employs 70 people on the island, said that his team has spent more than four decades building a sustainable business, only to watch CalMac and the Scottish Government shrink it over the past five years. What does John Swinney say to Stephen, his family and his staff, whose livelihoods are being put at risk by the SNP Government?

The First Minister: What I would say to Mr Peteranna—whom I have met on many occasions and for whom I have great respect—is that the Scottish Government is investing in the ferry network. We have commissioned the Glen Sannox and the Glen Rosa from Ferguson’s. We have four large vessels coming from the Cemre yard in Turkey and seven small vessels have been procured by the Government.

When the Government came in to office in 2007, the 2006-07 expenditure on ferries in Scotland was £90 million. In the forthcoming budget, which Mr Sarwar did not support, the expenditure will be £530 million—a 23 per cent increase in funding levels on last year. [*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear one another.

The First Minister: What I would say is that the Government is investing in the ferry network. We have procured six large vessels to join the network. We have got seven smaller vessels that will be joining the network over time. The Government is putting up the money to support that.

Mr Sarwar has talked about the Ferguson's yard. I remind him of what the GMB said when it wrote to him in 2022. Mr Sarwar was told by the GMB that the Labour Party's approach to the situation at Ferguson's is so "disappointing". That is what the GMB told Mr Sarwar. Why? It did so because Mr Sarwar and his colleagues, who are repeatedly shouting at me today, have done what the Tories have done for years—they have run down Ferguson's while this Government has supported Ferguson's, for which I make no apology today.

Cabinet (Meetings)

3. Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): To ask the First Minister when the Cabinet will next meet. (S6F-03919)

The First Minister (John Swinney): The Cabinet will next meet on Monday, in Kirkintilloch, where we will have the opportunity to meet local businesses, service providers and community groups, as well as to hear directly from local community members.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: Since the launch of the Netflix drama "Adolescence", everyone has been talking about the challenges that young people face—violence in schools, the rise of toxic misogynists such as Andrew Tate and online bullying. That is not just drama—it is happening here and now in Scotland, too.

Last summer, the Scottish Government published a new action plan that aimed to make pupils and staff feel safe and supported. However, new research published today by my party shows that more than 24,000 violent incidents have been reported in our schools in the months since the plan was revealed. Incident for incident, that level of reporting matches the trajectory of the record-breaking 40,000 reports of school violence that were recorded last year.

Pupils should not be going to school afraid. Teachers deserve to know that the Scottish Government has their back. Does the First Minister think that pupils and staff feel any safer or more supported? What further practical actions will his Government take to combat violence in our schools?

The First Minister: I agree with Mr Cole-Hamilton on the impact of the drama "Adolescence", because it is leading to significant debate in our society—which I think is absolutely

necessary—about the unacceptable behaviour of some supposed influencers, who are influencing very poor behaviour, among young men in particular, in our society today.

I read with care some reflections by Gareth Southgate in the Dimbleby lecture, which I thought were significant contributions to the debate. I again reinforce—as I have done on a number of occasions as First Minister—the importance of me exercising the leadership that I need to exercise to improve the culture and behaviour of men and boys in our society today.

In relation to the question of violence in our schools, Mr Cole-Hamilton correctly indicated that the Government has worked with our local authority partners to take forward the behaviour in schools action plan. That plan includes a range of actions that are designed to improve the situation, which I think that Mr Cole-Hamilton and I would probably accept has been influenced by the aftermath of Covid and the unacceptable examples of leadership that I have just highlighted.

I am always open to wider consideration of how we can support school staff and ensure that schools are safe places for young people to be educated in, because schools must be safe places for young people to be educated in. In some circumstances, school might well be the only safe place that a young person experiences.

I am therefore very open to dialogue with Mr Cole-Hamilton on how we can take further practical measures, beyond what the Government has already announced, to ensure that we support our schools in that important work.

"UK Living Standards Review 2025"

4. Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): To ask the First Minister what assessment the Scottish Government has made of the recent "UK Living Standards Review 2025", from the National Institute of Economic and Social Research, and any implications for its work to grow Scotland's economy. (S6F-03926)

The First Minister (John Swinney): The report rightly identifies economic problems that the United Kingdom continues to face. The UK is among the least generous on welfare across the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, the UK's regional income growth is among the slowest in Europe and its weak productivity growth is costing workers thousands per year.

Those are direct results of the welfare and economic choices of the current and previous United Kingdom Governments, which include the decision not to remove the two-child limit on universal credit. The report finds that removing

that would be the most cost-effective way to reduce poverty.

Despite the hindrances that those UK Government decisions place on our ability to grow the Scottish economy and to eradicate child poverty, gross domestic product per person in Scotland has grown by 10.3 per cent since 2007, compared with 6 per cent growth in the United Kingdom as a whole.

Michelle Thomson: I thank the First Minister for that response and simply add that the publication noted that the poorest households in Slovenia are now better off than the poorest in the UK.

Low productivity is costing workers in the UK £4,300 every year. Economic growth is the answer, so what further steps has the First Minister planned in that regard? When will plans be set out to offer Scots the opportunity to match the superior growth of other medium-sized countries that have proper fiscal powers in the form of independence?

The First Minister: The Government is taking a number of steps to improve the performance of the Scottish economy, where, as I highlighted in my earlier answer to Michelle Thomson, GDP per capita has actually grown at a faster rate than in the rest of the United Kingdom.

Scottish Government interventions have helped to improve economic performance, and we are taking a positive approach towards investment. On Monday, a number of ministers took part in an enormously successful investment forum that was well supported by international investors in the Scottish economy, and we undertake constant dialogue with investors.

I recognise, support and endorse Michelle Thomson's point that the already higher levels of economic growth per person that we have been able to deliver in Scotland under devolution would be enhanced if we had the wider range of fiscal powers that independent countries take for granted. I would want to deploy those powers to deliver growth and prosperity for the people of Scotland.

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): Life expectancy is the starkest measure of living standards and, after 18 years of the Scottish National Party Government, Scots still die younger than people in the rest of the UK. Why, on John Swinney's watch as Deputy First Minister and now as First Minister, has Scottish life expectancy dropped in five of the eight reporting periods since 2014?

The Presiding Officer: First Minister, please answer only in relation to the substantive question.

The First Minister: I wonder whether, in the aftermath of the Conservatives' ejection from

office last summer, Craig Hoy has reflected at all on the damage that has been done to our society by 14 years of austerity under the Conservative Government.

Is there absolutely no space for reflection that Craig Hoy has been part of a Conservative Party that has undermined the public finances and delivered poor economic growth and which now comes here and lectures me about a Government that has increased GDP per capita faster in Scotland than it has grown in the rest of the United Kingdom? That demonstrates the fact that Craig Hoy is just playing about with politics.

Craig Hoy: You cannot answer the question.

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear the First Minister.

The First Minister: He is playing about with politics, has no constructive solutions to bring forward for Scotland and is part of a party that has damaged the wellbeing of the people of Scotland by austerity.

Endometriosis Awareness Month

5. Rachael Hamilton (Etrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): To ask the First Minister how the Scottish Government is marking endometriosis awareness month. (S6F-03924)

The First Minister (John Swinney): Endometriosis is a chronic and painful condition that can have an enormous impact on the health and wellbeing of women who are affected. That is why endometriosis is a priority in our women's health plan.

March is endometriosis awareness month, and we are taking action to raise awareness of the condition and its symptoms and to help women to find information and support. Earlier this month, we lit Government buildings in yellow in recognition of endometriosis awareness month, and we have produced a social media toolkit to help others to raise awareness. We have also provided educational resources for those who work in primary care to improve understanding and to support earlier diagnosis, which I know is a critical issue for those who live with the condition.

Rachael Hamilton: Although the SNP said that it would bring the waiting time for endometriosis diagnosis down to 12 months, it remains at eight and a half years. After diagnosis, women with endo face further hell when waiting for treatment for this crippling condition. For example, 24-year-old Chloe Bremner was told that she faced a two-year wait for surgery on the national health service in Scotland. The pain was so unbearable that Chloe had to go to Abu Dhabi for treatment.

The women's health plan is not cutting it. It was meant to reduce health inequalities for women and

girls, and not to exacerbate them. What decisive action will the First Minister take to stop women such as Chloe paying a fortune for treatment because they cannot get proper care in Scotland?

The First Minister: First, the Government is working with a range of stakeholders to take forward the women's health plan. Secondly, the Government is putting in the investment to reduce waiting times to make sure that women such as Chloe do not have to wait as long as they are having to wait, and we are making progress in reducing waiting times across a number of sectors. Thirdly, we are putting in place more than £21 billion of investment in the national health service to make sure that it can meet the needs of the public in Scotland. That is all part of the budget that the Government has put forward, and I am glad to say that Parliament has supported it.

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): Although endometriosis is the second most common gynaecological condition in the United Kingdom, the level of data collection on it by health boards is extremely limited. Does the Government recognise that capturing more data on general practitioner referrals for endometriosis and waiting times for consultation would create greater transparency about how long it is taking to diagnose and treat endometriosis?

The First Minister: I recognise that those are important steps that could be taken to assist the situation. The emphasis on improving the information that is available to us about individual conditions is part of the approach that is envisaged in the women's health plan for Scotland. I am happy to take away the point that Carol Mochan puts to me to determine the steps that can be taken to improve the flow of data that will assist in the planning of such treatment.

Islamophobia

6. Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): To ask the First Minister what action the Scottish Government is taking to tackle Islamophobia in Scotland, in light of reports of an attack on a mosque in Aberdeen at the weekend. (S6F-03920)

The First Minister (John Swinney): I unequivocally condemn the recent attack on the Aberdeen Mosque and Islamic Centre. I recognise the traumatic impact that such incidents have on individuals, families and communities. That is why we are taking robust and meaningful action to challenge such prejudice. We are tackling hatred and Islamophobia through delivery of our hate crime strategy.

Kevin Stewart: That incident of vandalism has shocked Aberdeen's Muslim community and the city at large. The police have responded positively

and people in Old Aberdeen have rallied round to help the mosque congregation with the clean-up.

Does the First Minister agree with my view that it is incumbent on Governments, all leaders and all politicians in the Parliament and elsewhere to unite to tackle Islamophobia, intolerance and extremist views?

The First Minister: I agree with those sentiments, and it is for that reason that I have indicated that I will convene a gathering of political and civic leaders to establish constructive interventions that we can all agree on to create a cohesive society in which everyone feels safe and at home.

The example that Mr Stewart has given to Parliament—the steps that the community in Old Aberdeen has taken to demonstrate exactly that type of solidarity and support to the Muslim community in the city of Aberdeen—is a splendid example of the type of spirit that we need to have in this country, where we are defined by what unites us and not by what divides us.

Foysoyl Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): I raised Islamophobia with the First Minister just two weeks ago. The abhorrent attack on Aberdeen Mosque and Islamic Centre demonstrates that Scotland is not immune to hatred, so I welcome the First Minister's condemning it today. Will he outline what action is being taken to protect mosques during Ramadan? Does he agree that education is key to combating Islamophobia and hatred of all forms?

The First Minister: I agree with the points that Mr Choudhury has put to me. I reassure him and the Muslim community in Scotland that I have been constantly encouraged by the approach that Police Scotland has taken. It has always sought dialogue with the Muslim community and has, at times of anxiety, accentuated its engagement. I know that, during Ramadan and at other times of the year, Police Scotland is actively engaged with the community to ensure that it feels safe. That is what I want the community to feel, and I know that that is the view of the Parliament and Police Scotland.

The Presiding Officer: We move to constituency and general supplementary questions.

United Kingdom Government Benefit Changes

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): Under the United Kingdom Labour Government, most pensioners have lost their winter fuel allowance, women against state pension inequality have been cast aside and now we have had an attack on benefits. What impact will changes in the UK personal independence payment have on

pensioners who are making new applications under the Scottish Government's pension age disability payment, which is the replacement for the UK attendance allowance?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I understand the anxiety that Christine Grahame has expressed. We have all been enormously troubled and concerned by the United Kingdom Government's announcements, which will significantly undermine access to the disability benefits that will be available to individuals. We have to observe with care the process that the United Kingdom Government is going through, because it will determine the principal impact on the finances that we have available to support the benefits and social security arrangements that are under our control.

I cannot give a definitive answer to Christine Grahame, but I can say that, under the legislation that the Government has put to the UK Parliament, the decisions that we take on social security must ensure that we operate a system that has dignity and respect at its heart. The UK Government's decisions do not have at their heart dignity and respect, but austerity. We were told that the election of a Labour Government would end austerity, but this week disabled people and others who are vulnerable in our society have learned the hard way that Labour is carrying on the austerity of the Tories.

Scottish Fire and Rescue Service (Wildfire Warnings)

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): Last year, the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service dealt with 133 serious wildfire incidents between March and June, including 10 in my constituency. Despite a small increase in the latest budget, Scotland's national fire service has been cut to the bone, with cuts to firefighter numbers and fire engines, and stations being brought to their knees, according to the Fire Brigades Union.

In the light of the impact of climate change in rural areas, does the First Minister agree that additional resources need to be made available? What action is he taking regarding the "extreme" risk of wildfire warning that the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service has issued for low-lying areas in Scotland, including south-west Scotland, for this weekend?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I acknowledge the concern that exists about the warning that has been put in place. That warning has been put in place in March when, I think, none of us would ordinarily expect a wildfire warning in Scotland. That is an indication of the serious effects of climate change that we are now experiencing in our society, which must be addressed.

The Scottish Fire and Rescue Service will work with Forestry and Land Scotland, non-governmental organisations, landowners and communities to respond effectively to any incidents, and it is monitoring examples.

The service does an exceptional job in Scotland and is being supported by a budget increase of £29.3 million, which is a measure of the Government's commitment. Indeed, the budget is now £79 million higher than it was in 2017-18.

I am all for having considered discussions in the Parliament about the public finances, but I have to put it to Mr Carson that he has a bit of a brass neck coming here—

Finlay Carson: This is about wildfires.

The First Minister: Yes—this is about wildfires, but there would be no money to tackle them if the Parliament had not passed the budget—a budget that the Conservatives voted against—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Members!

The First Minister: I will not tire of pointing out to the Conservatives their total and utter inadequacy in the Parliament, because they come here asking us to spend more money when they would not put budget provision in place. The Tories are a disgrace.

BBC Scotland ("River City" Cancellation)

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): Many people have been shocked and saddened by BBC Scotland's decision to cancel "River City", with nearly 10,000 people having signed a petition by the trade union Equity to save the show. The decision has implications for jobs, opportunities and viewers. There are serious concerns that plans to replace the show will collectively offer 20 hours less broadcast television time a year to Scottish licence fee payers than the current 33 hours of "River City".

Does the First Minister share my concerns about that decision, and the concerns of Jackie Baillie and I about the potential loss of the Dumbarton studios, which are also used for many other productions?

Ahead of the 2027 charter renewal, will the Scottish Government seek guarantees that BBC Scotland's budget will be invested in local TV and film production?

The First Minister (John Swinney): Those are, of course, decisions for BBC Scotland, but I recognise the disappointment about the decision not to continue the "River City" series.

The point that underlies Mr Bibby's comments is the importance of production of television material

within Scotland. The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture has been discussing that issue with the BBC, and he will discuss the implications of the “River City” decision with Equity.

I want to be clear to the Parliament that the Government attaches the greatest importance to ensuring that production activity is undertaken genuinely within Scotland, so that the economic benefit of it is felt within Scotland. That is what the BBC charter would oblige of the BBC. The Government will be engaging very strongly to ensure that that is the case.

Offshore Wind Industry (Investment)

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): The success of Scotland’s offshore wind industry is, rightly, a priority of the Scottish Government, as it delivers on our climate obligations and unlocks new jobs and significant economic opportunities. Following this week’s global offshore wind investment forum, will the First Minister provide an update on the steps that the Scottish National Party Government is taking to attract investment and support in Scotland’s offshore wind industry?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The Government is taking a number of steps to support the development of the offshore wind industry. Significant investments have already landed in Scotland, with the commitments at Ardersier and the investments by Sumitomo at Nigg. We are also supporting further developments at Scapa Flow and Montrose. There is a great deal of investment happening.

I reassure Jackie Dunbar that the level of investment interest in Scotland, as demonstrated at the global offshore wind investment forum on Monday, is very encouraging. The Government is taking steps to ensure that we align the investment opportunities with sites in Scotland, supported by our enterprise development agencies and the Scottish National Investment Bank. A number of steps are coming together that will enable us to reap the rewards of the significant natural opportunities that we have.

Children with Cancer (Disability Benefits)

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): Research by Young Lives vs Cancer shows that children with cancer wait an average of six months for disability benefits in Scotland, leaving struggling families without support. Will the First Minister remove the three-month qualifying period for children with clear medical evidence, ensuring that financial aid starts at diagnosis, so that no child in Scotland faces additional hardship at an already overwhelming time for them and their family?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I will certainly explore that question. It is important that people in our society who require support are able to receive it at the earliest possible opportunity. We are seeing a reduction in Social Security Scotland’s processing times across the range of social security services that are available. I will consider the point that Mr Balfour has put to me.

Tour de France 2027

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): I am sure that the First Minister will be as excited as I am to see the Tour de France come to Scotland in 2027. It will be the first time in the event’s 124-year history that it has visited our cycling nation. What lessons were learned on the back of the UCI cycling world championships in 2023? It is important that the Tour should leave a lasting legacy, particularly for disadvantaged communities, once the peloton has moved on from Scotland.

The First Minister (John Swinney): I echo Mark Ruskell’s welcoming of the race organisers’ announcement at Edinburgh castle last night. I was delighted to be there to welcome the interest and commitment of those organising the Tour de France, and of the women’s race into the bargain. It will be the first time in the event’s history that the women’s race will have started outside France. That presents an enormous opportunity for Scotland and demonstrates our success and effectiveness in attracting major international events. I am delighted that we have been able to secure that for 2027.

The principal lesson that I have learned from the UCI world championships is that we must put in place infrastructure and facilities that enable local people to take part in cycling activity. The Government’s investment in active travel assists in that respect. We can see the effect of many of those changes around our communities, where such infrastructure is now being put in place.

United Kingdom Growth Forecast

Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): Ahead of the Chancellor of the Exchequer’s spring statement, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development has downgraded its United Kingdom growth forecast for 2025 to 1.4 per cent. Despite all the economic levers that it has at its disposal, the UK Labour Government is failing to grow the economy in order to hit its 2.5 per cent growth target. That is before the impact of the employer national insurance hike. The UK Government might have changed last year but, under Labour, we are seeing more of the same economic failure, with stagnant growth and continuing austerity. What impact will the downgraded forecast have on the

First Minister's Government's priority of growing Scotland's economy?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The issues that Mr MacDonald raises are serious. The effect of the increase in employer national insurance contributions will be a negative impact on growth. Indeed, there is now speculation that the material to be announced by the Chancellor of the Exchequer in the spring statement will reduce the growth forecast that is expected for the United Kingdom, which will inevitably have the effect of reducing the tax revenues that are likely to be available for the chancellor to utilise.

The implication of that is that there is likely to be further pressure on the Scottish Government's budget in the years to come. What we can expect is what we have seen from the Labour Government in the course of this week: the perpetuation of the austerity agenda that it inherited from the Conservatives, which it promised that it would bring to an end, but which it has revitalised as part of the Labour Government. I do not think that anyone would have imagined that a Labour Government would come into office and inflict more austerity on the people of Scotland.

Antisocial Behaviour (Bus Services)

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): This week, evening bus services through Tillicoultry's main bus stance have been suspended from 7 pm due to incidents of antisocial behaviour. McGill's and Midland Bluebird have taken that action due to a rise in violent incidents that have occurred this month. Such services are a lifeline for night-time workers, among others, and such behaviour is completely unacceptable. What urgent action can be taken to ensure the safety of bus drivers, passengers and the general public so that they are protected from needless violence?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I recognise the importance of all our public transport services being operated safely, and that applies to passengers and members of staff. Such incidents are indeed totally unacceptable. Police Scotland will take active steps to ensure that the community is kept safe and that there is every opportunity for bus services, and public transport services in general, to operate in the way that members of the public reasonably expect them to.

Ferguson Marine

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): The First Minister will be very much aware of my disappointment that Ferguson Marine did not win the order that was announced on Monday, but I welcome the fact that there is a new chief executive at the yard. Will the First Minister

guarantee and ensure that the Scottish Government will have a thorough and robust discussion and debrief with the management and the board of Ferguson Marine so that the yard can become competitive and can win future orders from the public sector and on the commercial market?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I am very pleased to welcome the appointment of Graeme Thomson as the new chief executive of Ferguson Marine. He will take up that post on 1 May.

The Government is taking all the steps that Mr McMillan has put to me about making sure that we strengthen the yard. The yard has been part of a competitive tendering process and, within that, it has put forward a credible bid that indicates the strength of the yard. The Government is supporting that with a further £14.2 million of investment to strengthen the yard, and is also working with the yard to ensure that it is able to command further work to support its future. That will remain the Government's priority in the forthcoming period.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes First Minister's question time. There will be a suspension to allow people to leave the chamber and the public gallery.

12:46

Meeting suspended.

12:48

On resuming—

Criminal Exploitation of Children

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-16434, in the name of Michael Matheson, on awareness of criminal exploitation of children. The debate will be concluded without any question being put. I invite members who wish to participate in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament welcomes the recent reports of Professor Alexis Jay and Action for Children, and the charity's service provision, which highlight the issue of criminal exploitation of children; considers that the testimony from exploited young people, Action for Children staff who support these young people, and other professionals connected with this work have described the harrowing and shocking experiences that children have encountered; understands that this issue hides in plain sight and that criminal exploitation of children can take place anywhere across Scotland, including in the Falkirk West constituency, and can happen to anyone; believes that these reports offer an opportunity to raise awareness of this important topic with members of the public, parliamentarians and decision makers, while also creating the chance to explore solutions to tackling this form of child abuse, and notes the belief that, in doing so, society can help to meet the aims and vision of The Promise, ensuring that Scotland does become the best place in the world for children and young people to grow up, where they feel loved, safe, respected and able to realise their full potential.

12:49

Michael Matheson (Falkirk West) (SNP): I am grateful to colleagues from across the chamber for supporting the motion and for being in the chamber to explore and raise awareness of the criminal exploitation of children.

There is perhaps no greater concern than children being subject to harm. One does not need to be a parent to understand that our children are vulnerable and innocent. The fact that anyone should seek to harm and abuse children is chilling and abhorrent in equal measure. Unfortunately, that harm exists in our society today. The debate allows us to focus on the criminal exploitation of children and the fact that it is a form of child abuse.

The debate coincides with two important milestones that are taking place this week. The first was on Tuesday, which was national child exploitation awareness day, which aims to raise awareness of child exploitation and to encourage people to speak out against it. Tomorrow is the first anniversary of the Jay review report. The report was commissioned by Action for Children and work on it was led by Professor Alexis Jay. I

place on record my thanks to her for her pivotal role in protecting children.

Colleagues will also be interested to note that Professor Jay has kindly agreed to present to members on 14 May. That will be a good opportunity to hear at first hand about some of the issues that will be raised in the debate. I will alert members to that event over the coming days.

I also offer my appreciation to Action for Children's chief executive, Paul Carberry. In my time as the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and as an MSP, I have known Paul for his outstanding work with Action for Children. He has a burning desire to help and support children and young people who have experience of our criminal justice system. He also ensured that Action for Children commissioned the very substantial report that was produced by the Jay review.

Paul Carberry often cites the fact that the children who need to be lifted out of trouble and adversity the most are often the children who are least likely to receive effective help and support. That is an important point that we should bear in mind throughout the debate. I also express my gratitude to Action for Children and other organisations for providing briefings ahead of the debate.

The Jay review found that many children are being devastated due to system-wide failure and that serious and preventable harm is being caused to children and young people across Scotland and the United Kingdom because of criminal exploitation. The review was able to draw on powerful evidence from young people, and parents, who have lived through exploitation. They outlined the drug abuse, horrific violence, threats and psychological trauma experienced. The report captured the fear and desperation of parents who did not know where to turn—some watched the grooming process happen and others did not know that it was happening until it was too late.

Criminal exploitation can affect anyone—there are examples of children from well-off backgrounds with strong, loving families being exploited. Other children are inherently more vulnerable, including those with additional support needs and disability, those impacted by poverty and those who have experienced our care system. Worryingly, black and minority ethnic children are overrepresented throughout the statistics relating to criminal exploitation.

One of the main issues is the duality of the predicament for exploited children. They are both victims who are involved in crime and actors who are perpetrating crime. When I was the Cabinet Secretary for Justice, part of that issue was addressed through the passing of the Human

Trafficking and Exploitation (Scotland) Act 2015, which aims to protect victims of trafficking.

The criminal exploitation of children and how it is tackled can be broadly summed up by reference to three areas. The first is identification. There is currently no agreed definition of criminal exploitation and, without a definition, the language used by agencies on what the criminal exploitation of children looks like is not consistent.

I hope that, when she responds to the debate, the minister will outline the Scottish Government's plans to address that. Those plans should take cognisance of the important measures that the UK Government recently announced in its Crime and Policing Bill. Could the bill's proposed provisions on the criminal exploitation of children be extended to cover Scotland?

The second area is the need to quantify the extent of the criminal exploitation of children. A lack of consistent recording means that we cannot describe the scale of the issue or identify achievable outcomes. For example, our main data source is the national referral mechanism, which is not specifically intended to protect children who have been exploited.

Better national awareness would help to promote greater understanding. It would also be worth while for professionals who work with children to have training that informs them about the potential risks of criminal exploitation and helps them to identify it.

The final area is about how we as a society respond to the criminal exploitation of children. Consistency is needed across all organisations. Information sharing, risk management and safeguarding practices are all needed to address the issue. Services should be adequately resourced to allow early intervention when identification takes place. Although a holistic approach across the UK is appropriate, Scotland can also lead the way by driving forward awareness of the need to ensure adequate protection for children to prevent them from being exploited.

The criminal exploitation of children is a lucrative business for some of the most sadistic people in our society. We have a responsibility, as a decent and caring society, to stop that form of child abuse. We need to protect our children and to crack down on those who are their exploiters. We need to do that collectively—together. I hope that the Scottish Government will work with Action for Children to look at how we can effectively tackle the problem of the criminal exploitation of children in Scotland and across the rest of the UK.

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

12:57

Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I thank Michael Matheson for bringing this extremely important issue to the chamber. His contribution was excellent. It is important that we recognise the need to define, to collect data and to work across bodies to make a change.

We are very aware of the issues surrounding children and young people who suffer from poverty and deprivation in our society, but, as Michael Matheson mentioned, criminal exploitation also involves children from more well-off backgrounds.

As a Parliament, we regularly debate the impacts of systemic failure and poverty on the lives of and outcomes for children, and we reaffirm our drive and determination to ensure that the Promise is met by 2030. It is important that we meet the Promise's milestone targets, as the Promise being kept will stem from the essential work that is being done to change those societal issues. However, in our debates on the Promise, we seldom focus on the people who would utilise the gaps in the system for their own nefarious desires. I do not believe that anyone in Parliament would dissent from the statement that the criminal exploitation of children is abhorrent and that all steps to eradicate it from Scotland should be explored and enacted.

I also thank Action for Children for its briefing for the debate and for highlighting its national polling data. It is horrific to think that 130,000 parents in the UK are saying that their child has experienced three or more of the signs of criminal exploitation in the past year alone. That is even more staggering when we realise that it is just the tip of the iceberg.

Because of the complexities of this type of exploitation, the figures that we have are underestimates. Often children either do not recognise that they are being manipulated, because they consider their abuser to be their friend, or are so afraid that harm could be inflicted on themselves or a loved one that they simply do not admit to the situation in which they find themselves.

The manipulation and coercion of children for criminal ends is not new. There is a long-established process of persuading and encouraging the most vulnerable in our society to take up criminal exploits. We only have to look at novels by Charles Dickens—"Oliver Twist" comes to mind—to see how little we have progressed in this area in nearly 200 years. If we do not step up and protect the children who are falling through the cracks in our system, we face discussing the issue again in years to come.

We do not need to wait for another 100 years—we need action. As Action for Children suggested,

the Promise bill that is to be introduced could take massive legislative strides in closing the gaps in the system for Scotland's children. Unfortunately, we are no further forward with what the bill will entail, the scope of its legislative changes and the outcomes that are expected from it. I appreciate the time that the minister has afforded me on the topic, and I respect the fact that it will be a complex bill that has to cover many issues. However, we were advised that the bill would be introduced at the start of 2025 and we are now heading towards the Easter recess, so I am concerned that delays will find us rapidly running out of time to scrutinise the bill—or, worse, that we will run out of time for it to be passed before the end of the parliamentary session.

I will do what I can to raise awareness of the topic. It is important that parents, carers and loved ones look out for tell-tale signs, which include sudden changes in friendship groups, especially if the friendship is with somebody who is older than the child or young person; changes in behaviour, physical appearance and language, such as the use of code words for drugs or sex; and unexplained gifts, money or, worse, injuries. Those are all signs of criminal manipulation, and I urge anyone with concerns about their children or any of the children they know to reach out, especially to groups such as Action for Children, to get the support that they need.

13:01

Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): I, too, thank Michael Matheson for bringing this important debate on the criminal exploitation of children to the chamber.

Let us be clear: this is not some distant tragedy. It is already happening. In our towns, on our streets and even behind the closed doors in our communities, there are children, vulnerable, scared and alone, who are being coerced, manipulated and threatened into a life of crime by ruthless criminals who see them, not as young lives full of potential, but as disposable tools to be used.

I thank Action for Children for its helpful briefing. The recent reports from Professor Alexis Jay and Action for Children lay bare the sheer scale of the appalling abuse that is taking place. The voices of those young people—haunted, fearful and yet so often ignored—tell us everything that we need to know. Those children are victims, but I am afraid that, instead of receiving protection, they are too often treated as criminals, slipping through the cracks of the very system that is meant to safeguard them.

Let us be clear: the criminal exploitation of children is child abuse. However, as we have

heard, the lack of a clear definition often creates a vacuum. Without a legal framework, agencies struggle to identify victims early, and perpetrators slip through the net. It is clear that we need a legal definition of the criminal exploitation of children—and we need it now—to ensure that we can protect and safeguard some of the most vulnerable members of our society.

As we know, it is estimated that more than 130,000 parents across the UK suspected that their child had been exploited, but the true figure is very likely to be higher. We are unsure of the true extent of the issue, and, if we do not know its scale, how can we hope to tackle it effectively? We must remember that these children are not making choices—they are being targeted. Exploiters seek out vulnerability—the children who are in poverty, the children in care and the children with additional needs. They offer false promises of money, security and belonging, then the trap is sprung. Debts, threats and violence become the new reality, a nightmare that they cannot wake from.

We have heard of children being forced to carry drugs and weapons, steal, beg and even commit acts of violence under duress. We have heard of children too afraid to step outside their homes and children wearing extra layers in case they are stabbed. Imagine living like that—but it is the brutal reality of criminal exploitation. There are children such as David, who was arrested for drug possession and labelled as a repeat offender, instead of being recognised as a victim. His family threatened his escape—it was impossible. However, thanks to the intervention of Action for Children, David found a way out, and he is now in college, working towards a future that he can finally call his own. His story is one of survival, but how many more like him are still trapped?

First, we urgently need a legal definition of the criminal exploitation of children. Secondly, we must strengthen joint investigations between law enforcement and social services, because this is not just a policing issue—it is a child protection emergency. Thirdly, we need welfare first approaches, because these children are not criminals. They are victims, and we must treat them as such.

Scotland has made a promise to be the best place in the world for children to grow up in. Today, the Parliament has the power to act—the power to uphold that promise—and I urge every MSP in the chamber to stand together, stand up for these children and let us be the Parliament that ends the criminal exploitation of children in Scotland.

13:05

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): I congratulate Michael Matheson on securing this important debate, because no issue is more serious than the safety of children; their wellbeing and life chances must be paramount when we make decisions in the chamber that affect their lives. I also thank Professor Jay and Action for Children staff for all the research and hard work that they have done to bring to light the facts surrounding the criminal exploitation of children. Their work is hugely important.

We should be under no illusions: as Michael Matheson has said, the criminal exploitation of children is a form of child abuse. For adults to force children to commit crimes and take advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, control, manipulate or deceive a child into criminal activity is abhorrent. Violence, concealing contraband such as drugs and weapons, giving false alibis, committing theft, begging in the streets or vandalising properties are just snapshots of some of the criminal acts that children in Scotland are being forced to undertake. We must do all that we can to protect them from that.

The charity Action for Children has told us that nowhere in the UK, including in Scotland, do we have a legal definition of what the criminal exploitation of children consists of—that point was made by Bill Kidd. The charity has told us that that matters, because of the lack of a shared understanding of criminal exploitation of children. That prevents co-ordinated, joined-up responses to such exploitation, particularly with regard to what happens in the early stages, when children are groomed for child criminal exploitation. The Scottish Government must bring forward a legal definition to ensure that people who are committing those acts of abuse are brought to justice. I noted what Michael Matheson said about the potential of extending aspects of legislation from down south.

We know that Scotland is failing when it comes to keeping the Promise to some of the most vulnerable children in our care. I know the commitments that the Scottish Government has made, but we are not close to keeping the Promise commitment by the deadline of 2030. That will lead to the criminal exploitation of many more children, who might be in care and who will have much poorer life chances and health outcomes, and it will cause many of those children significant trauma that might have lifelong consequences for them and, indeed, their families and future generations.

The Scottish Government must do more to protect children from criminal gangs or individuals who use children to commit criminal acts. We know that the exploitation of children in Scotland is

increasing, and we must do more to ensure that no child is abused in that way in the future.

13:09

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): I am pleased to speak in this important debate, and I thank my colleague Michael Matheson for bringing it to the chamber.

We all agree that only the lowest of the low exploit children, but, sadly, it is happening across Scotland, as the excellent but shocking report from Professor Alexis Jay and Action for Children reveals. Criminal exploitation of children is a complex, insidious form of child abuse that involves manipulation and coercion to make children participate in criminal activities and creates lifelong trauma for victims. As a result of its UK-wide polling last year, Action for Children has said that

“over 130,000 parents say their child has experienced three or more signs of criminal exploitation in the last 12 months”.

That could be the tip of the iceberg, given the lack of data.

I have been a member of the Criminal Justice Committee since my election in 2016, and my overriding interest has been the welfare of children and young people. Despite that, I have to admit that the facts contained in the report shocked me. How can this be happening in our beautiful country? After all, this is the country that introduced the vision of the Promise to ensure that Scotland is the

“best place in the world”

for children and young people to grow up in and where they feel loved, safe, respected and able to realise their full potential.

I thank Action for Children for its helpful briefing. I have to say that it is not an easy read; it highlights how criminal exploitation can include the retrieval of illicit drugs and money, the possession of weapons, the use of violence and firearms, the harbouring of offenders and the provision of false alibis for others. Cannabis growing, theft and burglary, and street crime such as begging and pickpocketing, are common, too. As a member of the children’s hearings system before being elected, I recall the case of a four-year-old boy who slept in the middle of a cannabis factory. It was just one of the many terrifying things that I heard at that time.

What can we do to eradicate this? Action for Children is concerned that nowhere in the UK, including here in Scotland, do we have a legal definition of the criminal exploitation of children. It believes that that obstructs co-ordinated, joined-up prevention work with children who are being groomed for that purpose. As we have heard, it

also believes that the upcoming and very welcome Promise bill could be a parliamentary vehicle to drive through urgent changes to keep Scotland's children safe.

We must stop children from falling through the cracks and getting drawn into a world of darkness. It is the responsibility of us all to recognise the signs and care for those who are lost. However, we know that it can be challenging for agencies to detect and respond appropriately to the criminal exploitation of children, for a range of reasons. Indeed, the system currently struggles to balance the dual roles of exploited children as both victims and perpetrators. However, we must make no mistake: we must go after the exploiters to protect children.

Any child is at risk of exploitation, regardless of age or background, and exploiters will look for vulnerabilities. Once bribed, a child's loyalty will be tested, and they will, of course, be scared or reluctant to talk about their exploiters. Certain groups of children are inherently more vulnerable, whether they have additional support needs and disability, are growing up in poverty or are in the care system, and there is also overrepresentation of black and minority ethnic children.

Serious organised crime can play a significant role in this insidious practice, with children groomed over time and threatened or targeted in a way that makes them feel that they cannot escape. As Roz McCall has outlined, we need to be aware of sudden changes in children. I will not go through those changes, as Roz McCall has already articulated them.

Let us all be aware of what is happening to a significant number of children in our country, let us prevent exploitation and let us protect our young people. It is our duty and responsibility to do so.

13:13

Ash Regan (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba): I, too, congratulate Michael Matheson on bringing this critical issue to the chamber. I hope that the Government will allocate time for a fuller debate on the topic in the future.

Today's debate should be not a formality but a crucial step in eradicating the criminal exploitation of children and in using our role for their protection. The decisions that are made in the chamber are key to creating an environment where the children of Scotland are free from abuse and protected from exploitation. We cannot explore solutions to tackling any form of child abuse without first acknowledging the elephant in the room, which is the systematic erosion of child safeguarding that has left children vulnerable to exploitation.

As other speakers have said, we must listen to Professor Jay, who has spent many years working to understand the consequences of child exploitation. The recommendations from her reports over several reviews must now be implemented with a sense of urgency.

We all have a role in preventing exploitation by ensuring that children are not just rescued from harm but equipped with the skills and support to prevent exploitation from taking place in the first place. Our job as decision makers cannot be to pour support for exploited children into a bucket when the bucket continues to have its safeguarding base completely eroded, because that is self-defeating.

I will take a minute to explore the mixed messages that we are sending to children and broader society regarding safeguarding, such as the language that is used around children's sexual activity.

The law states that sex with a minor is statutory rape, but how many times do we see headlines discussing the lifestyle choices of abused children? In schools, we ask children under the age of consent about their sexual activity, thereby normalising what is against the sexual offences law that is there to protect children. Furthermore, we publicly fund lobby groups such as LGBT Youth Scotland, which has a remit to provide services to an extensive age range, from 13-year-old children to adults aged 25. However, responses to freedom of information requests have shown that it is working beyond its remit by accessing primary school children and even influencing materials in nursery schools. I ask the Government to respond to that point, if possible, during the minister's summing-up speech.

Dr Cass was clear that affirmation is not a neutral act. However, what has changed to make materials Cass compliant throughout our education system, reflecting the accepted recommendations in Dr Cass's report? What are the learning objectives and measured outcomes of teaching sex and gender identity to nursery children, many of whom are not even toilet trained? Children look to adults and older peers to make sense of their world. Nurseries and schools are a child's first communities, independent of their parents and care givers. Those places have positional authority and have a key role in ensuring that safeguarding is embedded and understood.

If we are seeking to protect children from criminal exploitation, we must continue that important focus on child safeguarding and put it before any other adult-driven agenda.

13:17

The Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise (Natalie Don-Innes): I thank Michael Matheson for highlighting the important work that has been undertaken by Action for Children, Alexis Jay and others on child criminal exploitation. Today's debate provides a timely focus on that deeply concerning issue. As we have heard, local areas face significant challenges in addressing the risk and impact of child criminal exploitation, which often involves vulnerable children and families. Mr Matheson laid out clearly the risks to all children, and I agree with many of the sentiments in today's debate. Child criminal exploitation is abhorrent.

We have engaged closely with Action for Children and other stakeholders including Police Scotland, the Crown Office, the Children and Young People's Centre for Justice and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities on the review's recommendations to strengthen our approach to prevent and tackle this form of abuse.

It is important to recognise that a number of the review's recommendations have already been implemented in Scotland and, indeed, were informed by our approach. That includes the incorporation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which underpins a rights-based approach to protecting children; delivery of a statutory independent child trafficking guardians service; and the operation of the Lord Advocate's instructions for non-prosecution of victims of human trafficking. We want Scotland to lead the way in tackling all forms of child abuse and exploitation, so that we can live up to our ambitions and our shared vision for Scotland, and so that we can keep the Promise.

Evidence shows that the most effective way to prevent exploitation is through a focus on education, awareness raising and practitioner training. Last year, I had the privilege of attending the launch of the "You Are Not Alone" resource for schools, which focuses on the risks and harms of child exploitation. Co-developed by young people, I Am Me Scotland and Police Scotland, the resource offers a wealth of information to empower young people to recognise harm and know where to turn for support when they need it most.

Michael Matheson pointed to the importance of training. In line with the review recommendations, we are taking steps to educate and empower our front-line practitioners through the provision of the resources and training that they need to recognise the signs of child criminal exploitation and to respond appropriately.

In 2023, on behalf of the serious organised crime task force, we published guidance for

practitioners on criminal exploitation. Many members have referred to the need for a definition. The guidance, which supports a shared definition of criminal exploitation and promotes early identification of those who are at risk, was incorporated into the updated national guidance for child protection in 2023. The definition is similar to the one that was proposed in the Jay review, and both Police Scotland and the Scottish Children's Reporter Administration have stated that they are in the process of adopting the definition to inform internal guidance. In June 2024, a criminal exploitation awareness-raising event took place to raise awareness of the guidance among practitioners and leaders across various sectors and to promote multi-agency working between organisations.

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): I thank Michael Matheson for bringing the debate to the chamber. It is a really important topic and has been looked at by the Criminal Justice Committee, of which I am a member. On the point about awareness, I highlight the issue of county lines, whereby young people—often, children—are recruited by gangs to participate in illegal drug-related activities. That issue is perhaps flying slightly under the radar in Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Minister, I can give you the time back.

Natalie Don-Innes: I thank Audrey Nicoll for making that point and assure her that it is being considered in our overall response to the issue.

Education Scotland has developed a professional learning package for local authorities' strategic safeguarding leads, based on the practitioner guidance. That resource supports consistent and evidence-based messaging to teachers and all who work in education settings.

In addition, dedicated Scottish Government funding to keep the Promise is being provided to Action for Children and the Children and Young People's Centre for Justice in order to develop an improvement framework for all practitioners to enhance the identification of and response to criminal exploitation. The framework is due to be published later this year.

To further improve the collective response to child abuse, including child criminal exploitation, we will roll out national multi-agency risk assessment training for social workers, police and health professionals over the next year.

We have also provided more than £450,000 of funding across 2023 to 2026 to support the anchor Highlands project, an Inverness-based alliance between Barnardo's, Action for Children and Aberlour that supports young people who are at

risk of exploitation through a focus on contextual safeguarding.

The Jay review compels us to re-evaluate our approach to what is a complex issue and to acknowledge that children who are caught in exploitation are manipulated and grouped by perpetrators. I am pleased that the Lord Advocate's instructions for non-prosecution of victims of human trafficking have been recognised. Those instructions, which were updated last year, advise against the criminalisation of child exploitation victims. That approach sits alongside wider reform of the youth justice system in Scotland, which is clear on the need to ensure that children who are exploited are viewed through a child protection lens rather than a justice one.

Ash Regan: *[Made a request to intervene.]*

Natalie Don-Innes: I would like to make progress.

We also recognise the importance of support for victims. Backed by £10 million of Scottish Government funding across 2023 to 2025, the bairns' hoose programme is already improving the experiences of the child protection and justice system for young people, including those who have experienced child criminal exploitation.

We are actively working to improve data. The latest annual child protection statistics, which are due to be published on 25 March, will provide further information on how child criminal exploitation has been reported by children's services across Scotland.

I turn to the criminality of the individuals who perpetrate child criminal exploitation. The partners on the serious organised crime task force continue to use every means at their disposal to disrupt serious organised crime, including child criminal exploitation, and to raise awareness of the serious harms that it causes. We are reviewing the use of existing legislation to better prosecute child sexual exploitation offenders. In response to many members' points, I note that we are working with the UK Government on its Crime and Policing Bill, which includes provisions to enhance police powers to disrupt child criminal exploitation and child sexual abuse and exploitation. Scottish ministers aim to take those measures forward through the legislative consent process.

The Jay review also highlights the fact that children who do not have an immigration status are vulnerable to exploitation. For them, Scotland's statutory independent child trafficking guardians service is vital, as was recognised by the Jay review.

I have much more to say, but I appreciate that time is short, so I will conclude. I look forward to working with members, Action for Children and

other partners to prevent and tackle child criminal exploitation in order to make Scotland the best place in the world to grow up and a place in which children are safe and respected.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate.

13:25

Meeting suspended.

14:15

On resuming—

Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body Question Time

Armed Forces Parliamentary Scheme

1. Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body, further to the answer to question S6W-34464, what its position is on whether MSPs should be able to participate in the armed forces parliamentary scheme, in addition to the armed forces visits programme, should they wish to do so, in light of it being a structured 15-day course with one of the armed services, and it also offering the opportunity to enrol on a Royal College of Defence Studies postgraduate degree level course in strategic leadership and international strategic studies, and it therefore being different in nature. (S6O-04476)

Jackson Carlaw (Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body): I thank Paul Sweeney for his sustained interest in these matters. As a member, he is aware that the Scottish Parliament's armed forces parliamentary visits programme was established relatively recently, in 2017. Since then, many members, including me, have participated in outward visits to defence bases across Scotland as well as reciprocal visits to the Parliament. I say that as an enthusiastic former member of the Combined Cadet Force.

The current programme is a good fit for the Scottish Parliament and its members, and, although there are no plans to review it at the current time, Mr Sweeney has highlighted some differences between the two schemes. Accordingly, the corporate body has asked parliamentary officials to contact the armed forces parliamentary scheme to inquire whether members of the Scottish Parliament may participate in those programmes. We will update Mr Sweeney and members on that in due course.

Paul Sweeney: I welcome the response in relation to exploring the idea with the Armed Forces Parliamentary Trust. It would be welcome if members of the Scottish Parliament and other devolved legislatures were able to participate in the programme. Given that it is governed by an independent board of trustees and funded largely from industry, that would not necessarily come at any cost to the Scottish Parliament, and it would provide an opportunity for members to augment the existing excellent and well-attended visits programme, which I have also had the opportunity to attend, with a deeper engagement with our armed forces.

Jackson Carlaw: I do not disagree with that. However, in the first instance, I and the corporate body would encourage more members of the Parliament to participate in the scheme that we have, which is the armed forces parliamentary visits programme. Members will be aware that a communication has gone out in the past couple of days, which identifies opportunities that will be available later this year. Too few MSPs have participated in such opportunities, and I encourage others to do so. It really is a great experience.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): There is a brief supplementary question from Rachael Hamilton.

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): I am sorry, Deputy Presiding Officer—I pressed my button because I have a lodged question and you were looking at me.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you for the clarification, Ms Hamilton. I will try to avoid doing that too much in the future. [*Laughter.*]

Catering Products (Companies Involved in Activities Related to Israeli Settlements)

2. Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): To ask the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body whether it will consider removing from its catering outlets any products made by companies identified by the United Nations human rights office as being involved in activities related to illegal Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territory. (S6O-04478)

Claire Baker (Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body): The catering services at the Scottish Parliament are provided through our service partner Sodexo Limited. Sodexo has been monitoring any supply requirements, and it has no original sources or suppliers within occupied Palestinian territory. I understand that Sodexo continues to review its supply chain, working with supply chain partners to understand risks and challenges related to issues such as international conflict, political instability and logistics.

Patrick Harvie: I am grateful for that answer, and I take on trust the assurance that there are no specific products produced in the occupied territories. However, there are products produced by companies that are complicit in activity in the occupied territories. All of us would rightly be horrified if there were products on sale that were profiting companies that were benefiting from the illegal Russian occupation of Ukraine. It seems to me that exactly the same principle should apply in relation to companies that are complicit in the Israeli occupation of Palestine.

I urge the corporate body to consider more deeply the question and whether we can have a

stronger position, agreed with catering partners, to ensure that such companies are not profiting from the custom of either staff members or visitors to the Parliament.

Claire Baker: It is important that the corporate body operates within the legal framework. Through the Scottish procurement policy, we ensure that all our contractors comply with all legal requirements. They also adhere to the United Kingdom Government's embargoes and sanctions list, which was updated in October last year.

Nevertheless, I hear Patrick Harvie's concerns. He might be interested to learn that our catering contract is due for renewal and that it will be put out to tender soon.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): Is Patrick Harvie's question not just another example of his student union-style obsessive politics? Should the parliamentary catering service not continue to focus on delivering good service and value for money, especially in the eyes of the taxpayer?

Claire Baker: I recognise that Patrick Harvie and Stephen Kerr have different views on some important issues. I say again that our catering service meets all its legal requirements and that we will be putting the contract out to tender quite soon.

Stamps

3. John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind): To ask the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body what information it has on for what reason stamps that are issued in the Parliament's post office are not Scotland country-definitive stamps by default. (S6O-04474)

Claire Baker (Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body): The corporate body is not responsible for the commercial decisions of the on-site post office. My understanding is that it stocks the standard range of postage stamps that would be available in all high street post offices to cater for customers' everyday mailing needs. It has confirmed to us that country-definitive postage stamps are available for purchase. On checking at the post office this morning, I found out that it has 300 first-class Scottish stamps and that more can be ordered on request, which would take one to two days.

John Mason: I accept the point that the situation is the same in post offices outside the Parliament, but the Royal Mail has gone to considerable effort, under pressure, to produce what I think are excellent first and second-class stamps for Scotland. This is Scotland's national Parliament and we are selling rest-of-the-UK stamps. Does the member not agree that that is bizarre?

Claire Baker: As I said, the Parliament's post office makes its own commercial decisions, and a range of stamps—including Scotland-specific stamps—are available on request. The post office currently has Scotland-specific first-class stamps in stock, and it would be happy, if requested to do so by a member, to order a fuller range of stamps, including country-definitive stamps. I understand that, at the moment, it is also possible to get Spice Girls stamps and AC/DC stamps.

Scottish Parliamentary Pension Scheme

4. Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): I declare an interest as a former trustee of the Scottish parliamentary pension scheme.

To ask the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body what discussions it has had with the Scottish parliamentary pension scheme trustees about investments in Tesla and any other companies that may conflict with the scheme's statement of investment principles. (S6O-04477)

Maggie Chapman (Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body): Although Mark Ruskell's specific point is one for the trustees of the Scottish parliamentary pension scheme and not the corporate body, I can advise that the SPCB's duty, in accordance with the provisions of the Scottish Parliamentary Pensions Act 2009, is to nominate trustees to administer the pension scheme and manage its assets.

Trustees are appointed by the Parliament on the passing of a resolution to approve their nomination. They perform an important role in ensuring the proper running of the scheme. They operate separately from the corporate body in holding scheme assets in trust for scheme beneficiaries. They must fulfil fiduciary duties, including the duty to act impartially, prudently, responsibly and in the best interests of scheme beneficiaries.

The trustees act in accordance with their investment strategy, while keeping the corporate body informed of changes as required. The corporate body does not expect the trustees to notify it of the investment decisions of its fund managers.

Mark Ruskell: It is quite clear that Elon Musk has promoted extremism and misinformation. He is part of a Trump Administration that has shown utter contempt for human rights across the world. He is a toxic individual. That is just one of the reasons why the value of shares in Tesla is collapsing right now, which will impact on our pensions. Therefore, I welcome the news that Baillie Gifford, which runs our pension funds, has been reducing the amount of funds in Tesla. I would like to see total divestment from Elon Musk's companies as well.

Will Maggie Chapman reflect on the fact that, this month, the SPSS is to conduct its triennial review? As an employer, the SPCB could and perhaps should encourage all members of the scheme to give feedback on such ethical issues in relation to the ethical investment policy, which is an important part of the governance of our collective pension funds.

Maggie Chapman: As Mark Ruskell knows, I, too, am pleased that the triennial review will get under way imminently. As he will be aware, as a former scheme trustee, it is the main duty of trustees to act in the financial interests of the scheme beneficiaries. It is also important to be clear that the fiduciary duties of the scheme are taken into account in advice, and I am sure that Baillie Gifford will be taking note of changes in the valuation of Tesla.

I am aware that, in previous sessions, the pension scheme administrators met the corporate body on a more regular basis and that that has not been routine during this session. I therefore undertake to go back to the corporate body and request that. If we decide to take that forward, the corporate body will ensure that there is consultation and discussion with scheme members. I will get back to the member about that in due course.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): That question is another example of student politics. Does the member agree with me that, if we were to extrapolate what is being asked for here, we would need to look at the whole supply chain behind any manufacturers or investments and that that would be an impossible task?

Maggie Chapman: I gave a pretty full answer in my response to Mark Ruskell. It is clear that the fiduciary duties of the scheme trustees are taken seriously and that supply chain considerations are taken into account. As I said, the corporate body will have further discussions about how best to consult members of the pension scheme, whether or not that is part of our role and responsibility, and will come back to Parliament on that.

LGBTQ+ Staff (Support)

5. Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): To ask the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body what measures it is taking to support any LGBTQ+ staff whose welfare may be negatively impacted by any increase in the use of language in the chamber and committees that may be perceived as trans-exclusionary. (S6O-04479)

Jackson Carlaw (Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body): The corporate body takes its duties under health and safety legislation seriously and has a range of measures in place to promote good mental health and wellbeing for all staff.

Those include regular discussions between managers and staff, during which welfare concerns can be discussed and resolved. Staff can also access the free and confidential employee assistance programme, which provides a range of support, including access to counselling.

The corporate body opposes all forms of unlawful discrimination and will take a zero-tolerance approach to and appropriate action against any individual displaying such behaviour. As part of that, staff can access an independent support service, including advocacy support, to help them to address any concerns and to seek an appropriate resolution.

The corporate body's commitment to all staff, including LGBTQ+ staff, is long-standing and non-negotiable.

Ariane Burgess: According to the most recent census, trans people make up less than 0.5 per cent of Scotland's population. However, just this year, their rights to access public services, seek support following rape or abuse, work in the public sector, serve on public bodies and even be mentioned in schools—in short, merely to exist in the public realm at all—have been challenged in this Parliament on no fewer than 10 separate occasions.

We have a duty of care to all who work in the building. Would those completely disproportionate attacks on a group with a characteristic that is protected under the Equality Act 2010 be tolerated in connection with any other marginalised group?

Jackson Carlaw: I refer the member to my response of a moment ago, which is the corporate body's response and attitude to the issue.

The uses of language and other incidents to which the member referred have happened within the chamber and in committee meetings, and they are therefore not a matter that falls within the responsibility of the corporate body. The Parliament's standing orders say that

"Members shall at all times conduct themselves in a courteous and respectful manner and shall respect the authority of the Presiding Officer"

or, in committee meetings, the convener.

Legislation Team (Resources)

6. Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): To ask the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body what recent assessment it has made of the resources given to the legislation team. (S6O-04475)

Maggie Chapman (Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body): A comprehensive review of the staffing resource required for session 6 was

undertaken in 2021. As a result of that review, additional staff were brought on stream in 2022-23 across the clerking function, including within the legislation team. A flexible resourcing model is operated across the clerking teams, enabling the movement of staff across functions to support peaks in parliamentary business throughout the session. Senior leaders within the parliamentary business directorate continually assess and reprioritise staff resources to ensure the effective delivery of business. Additional resources are being allocated to the legislation team in the forthcoming weeks to increase its staffing complement until the end of the session.

Rachael Hamilton: I am pleased to hear that additional resources are being allocated to the legislation team in the next few weeks, but there has been a noticeable decline in the standard of bills that are presented by the Scottish Government. The legislation team plays a really important role in supporting members of the Scottish Parliament, but the poor standard of Scottish Government bills is resulting in an increased need for significant and complex amendments, which is causing delays in the parliamentary process.

Does the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body share my concerns about the quality of the bills that are being introduced by the Scottish Government, which is having an impact on parliamentary resources and the welfare of the staff here?

Maggie Chapman: Although the corporate body acknowledges that, in the current session, a number of bills have been subject to delays during the scrutiny process for a variety of reasons, none of those relate to the resourcing of the legislation team. Legislation team officials work with their Scottish Government counterparts via established routes to ensure that business is prioritised and programmed appropriately and to avoid pinch points wherever possible.

I appreciate that that does not address the member's question in full, but it is not the corporate body's role to take a view on the quality of bills that come to Parliament from the Scottish Government, as Rachael Hamilton suggests.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body question time. Before we move on to the next item of business, there will be a very short pause to allow the front-bench teams to quickly change positions.

Portfolio Question Time

Education and Skills

14:31

School Safety (Highlands and Islands)

1. **Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government how it is ensuring that schools in the Highlands and Islands are safe learning environments for pupils and staff. (S6O-04466)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): Although it is the statutory responsibility of local authorities to manage and maintain their school estates, the Scottish Government expects them to provide safe learning environments for all pupils and staff. As a result of continued investment by central Government and local government, the proportion of schools that are in good or satisfactory condition increased from 62.7 per cent in 2007 to 91.7 per cent in 2024. However, I want that progress to stretch further so, tomorrow, Scottish Government officials will participate in an event with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, local authorities, the Scottish Futures Trust and other stakeholders to talk to this important matter.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: The issue of violence in our schools was raised with the First Minister at First Minister's question time earlier today. As is the case across Scotland, there is a worrying increase in violence in Highland schools. Figures that have been passed to me suggest that a member of staff in a Highland school is assaulted approximately every 22 minutes, with 3,408 reported incidents in the 2023-24 school year, and there are rising concerns about violence involving knives, improvised weapons such as scissors and sexual assaults in our schools. Given that the First Minister failed to give a detailed response when he was questioned on the subject, can the cabinet secretary advise me what specific and immediate actions the Scottish Government is taking to tackle the crisis and ensure the safety of staff and pupils?

Jenny Gilruth: I thank the member for his interest in the matter, which was raised at First Minister's question time today. He asked what specific action the Government is taking. The First Minister set out in his response the specific action that I have taken in relation to the action plan. However, to give the member some comfort, I note that the action plan will be updated in the coming weeks, and I am more than happy to write to him to provide an update on that work.

The First Minister also spoke to some of the challenges that we are seeing in our schools in relation to misogyny. Last year, the Government launched a gender framework in that respect and looked at supporting schools with direct resources around that issue.

More interestingly, perhaps, given the member's question, the Time for Inclusive Education campaign has been rolling out some work in relation to tackling misinformation in our schools. I was in a school recently—two weeks ago—when that fascinating work was launched, and it links exactly to the question that Mr Cole-Hamilton put during First Minister's question time.

The Government has also provided an uplift in funding in relation to some of these challenges.

As the member will have heard in the First Minister's response, some of the issues relate to Covid, but there have been changes more broadly in relation to behaviour and relationships.

I am conscious of time, but I am happy to write to the member with more detail if that would be useful.

Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): It is so important that the facilities that teachers and pupils teach and learn in are positive and of a high standard, and I know that there is great excitement at the moment about the new Nairn academy building. Can the cabinet secretary give more detail on the investment that is being made in the Highlands and Islands through the learning estate investment programme?

Jenny Gilruth: Ms Roddick is absolutely right to raise the importance of the school estate, which I mentioned in my response to Mr Halcro Johnston, as we know that the quality of the school estate can help to make a positive impact on attainment. Through the £2 billion learning estate investment programme, the Scottish Government will provide the Highlands and Islands with substantial funding for nine school infrastructure projects, which includes £21.3 million for the new Nairn academy, which the member has spoken about, and £23.4 million for the Tain campus.

Additional Support Needs (Islands)

2. Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to ensure that there is adequate access to support in schools for children with additional support needs in island areas, including the Orkney Islands constituency. (S6O-04467)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): Local authorities oversee the delivery of education and have a statutory duty to identify, provide for, and review the support that they provide for pupils with additional support

needs in their local school communities, including the Orkney Islands. Spending on additional support for learning by local authorities has reached a record high of more than £1 billion in 2023-24, and the 2025-26 budget allocates a further £29 million of investment for ASN. In addition, the national e-learning offer provides a range of online support and resources to supplement local provision.

Liam McArthur: I welcome the cabinet secretary's response. Notwithstanding that, Audit Scotland has made it clear that ministers have not done enough to plan for the growing demand for ASL provision, and that funding arrangements are not currently fit for purpose. Unmet demand is one of the most significant risks for Orkney Islands Council's education services, with pressures on staff recruitment and retention as well as a shrinking school estate contributing to the inability of schools to provide the support that children who have additional needs require. In Orkney, all children who require additional support, including those who have more complex needs, are provided for by mainstream schooling, but mainstream schools are excluded from the funding that is available for special schools.

What will the cabinet secretary do to address the specific island dimension to the wider, and growing, problems with the delivery of ASL to pupils across Scotland?

Jenny Gilruth: I am mindful of Audit Scotland's report, which I responded to two weeks ago. I am keen to engage with Audit Scotland on the detail of its report, which talks to the Scottish Government's funding and the need for more granularity to ensure that it gets to those who need it most. I know that the member will welcome the extra funding that is being provided through phase 3 of the learning estate investment programme to the Orkney Islands Council, which will provide funding to support the Kirkwall ASN centre project. I am keen to reflect on the member's specific question about how our policy interacts with islands provision with my officials, and I am more than happy to engage with him on that point.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Stephen Kerr has requested a supplementary. I point out that the question in the business bulletin concerns children with additional support needs in island areas, including the Orkney Islands constituency. If that is the matter that Mr Kerr wishes to ask a supplementary question about, he is most welcome to do that.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): Yes, it is specifically and generally about the Audit Scotland report. [*Interruption.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Kerr, it has to relate to children's additional support needs in

island areas, including the Orkney Islands constituency.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): As I say, it is specific, but it also has application in other authorities.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am not going to get into it. I am giving you the opportunity to come up with something that relates to the question that is in the business bulletin. Please either continue or do not.

Stephen Kerr: I am referring to the Audit Scotland report. I wrote to the cabinet secretary and she kindly replied to me. In her reply, she said that

“We know that there is a general consensus across our education system, that the principles of inclusion—on which our system is based—are sound.”

Does the cabinet secretary accept that, in some instances, the presumption of mainstreaming has gone too far, to the detriment of the children with additional support needs and the learning environment in the classroom?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Kerr, that did not relate—

Stephen Kerr: In Orkney.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Well, if that is the level of participation.

Cabinet secretary, please respond to Mr Kerr to the extent that the question relates to the subject matter of the substantive question that is in the business bulletin.

Jenny Gilruth: The member and I recently discussed the issue during a members’ business debate. I do not accept the premise of the member’s point about the presumption of mainstreaming, but I am happy to engage with him on the substantive issue of funding. I have to note, as I did in the recent members’ business debate, which was led by Alexander Stewart, that the Conservatives failed to support the Government’s budget, which provided an extra £29 million for additional support needs, including for children who live in the Orkney Islands.

Additional Support Needs (Learning Environments)

3. **Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government how it supports schools to ensure that pupils with additional support needs can access learning environments that meet their needs without being excluded from activities or isolated from their peers. (S6O-04468)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): All children and young people should receive the support that they need

to reach their full potential. Local authorities have a statutory duty to identify and provide such support and to review the support that they provide for pupils with additional support needs in the local community.

Complementing that, curriculum for excellence provides a broad framework within which educators are empowered to provide learning and teaching experiences that best suit the needs of individual learners. That includes taking into account choice and personalisation for the learner in curriculum design and delivery.

Evelyn Tweed: I have several constituents who have taken their children out of school because the additional support provision isolated them from their peers. What steps does the Government take to engage with local authorities to ensure that parents in that situation have access to resources to support home education?

Jenny Gilruth: We engage regularly with local authorities, particularly via the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities. The member will be aware of the establishment of the new education assurance board, which will meet in the next two weeks to talk about improving relationships and the delivery of services in education.

We have an inclusive education approach in Scotland. That was something that the national discussion, in which COSLA and local government were key partners, highlighted as a strength in our provision.

There is a wide range of educational provision in Scotland that meets the needs of children and young people with additional support needs. Our councils are responsible for determining the most appropriate provision to suit the needs of those learners.

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): The Government rightly supports the presumption of mainstreaming. When we get education right for pupils with ASN, we get it right for the vast majority of pupils. When did the Government last specifically evaluate the additional cost of mainstreaming? Given the increase in the number of ASN-identified pupils, does current funding match that evaluation?

Jenny Gilruth: That is quite a wide-ranging question. I am keen to come back to the member in relation to the increase in additional support needs in recent years. Some of that shift has been as a result of the Government broadening out definitions, which we think was a welcome move at the time. Undoubtedly, that has led to an increase. It has also been driven by more diagnosis, which is hugely important.

The member talks about resourcing. In a previous response, I talked about the record levels

of spending that are going from central Government to local government—there was £1 billion in the past financial year, which was supplemented by £29 million of investment.

To go back to Mr McArthur's point in relation to the Audit Scotland report, it is hugely important that the Government has granularity in the detail of the extra funding that we are protecting at national level and important that that is going to those who need it most at local level. Through the education assurance board, which I mentioned in my response to Evelyn Tweed, we will continue to have those discussions with COSLA.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): Related to ASN delivery, I had a meeting yesterday with the Royal College of Psychiatrists in Scotland, which warned that there has been an unprecedented rise in referrals for neurological conditions, with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder levels rising by up to 800 per cent in just two years across health boards. Conditions in the health service mean that waiting lists are now of up to eight years, which has an impact on education services and ASN. The RCP in Scotland highlights that one of the reasons for the situation is the lack of access to activities such as outdoor learning and sport—activities that give children an outlet for their anxiety and enthusiasm. When will the Scottish Government recognise the need to reverse the decline in such activities in our schools, to the betterment of pupils' mental health and education?

Jenny Gilruth: The member spoke to some of the challenges in relation to neurological conditions and in particular the increases that we have seen. I mentioned in my response to Mr Whitfield the rationale behind some of those increases, which I accept.

Brian Whittle also spoke to the need for diagnosis and the waiting times that are perhaps associated with that. I again put on record that, from an educational perspective, there is no requirement for a formal diagnosis in order for a young person to obtain support. That is really important in relation to how young people receive support in school.

The member mentioned outdoor education, which is hugely important. In all my visits as cabinet secretary, I see it as a pillar of our approach to education in Scotland, particularly in relation to our younger, early years settings, where I see it routinely used. I am not necessarily sure that I accept the final premise of the member's question about a reduction in that area.

Co-ordinated Support Plans

4. Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what

action it is taking to ensure that local authorities provide co-ordinated support plans for pupils who need extra support. (S6O-04469)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): We must be clear that arrangements for a co-ordinated support plan should be put in place to enable crucial individual support and interventions when multiple agencies are involved in supporting a child or young person, but that having such a plan is not a requirement for accessing additional support for learning. When a young person or child requires a co-ordinated support plan, education authorities have a legal duty to put arrangements in place to identify that need.

I am committed to including further clarity on the relationship between the CSP and other plans in a staged intervention model that will form part of the refreshed code of practice on additional support for learning. Meanwhile, as part of our work on the ASL action plan, we are developing national professional learning resources and accessible information and guidance on CSPs for children, young people, parents and carers.

Clare Adamson: As the cabinet secretary mentioned, demand for additional support needs services is rising. Consistency in the provision of such services across local authority areas is imperative. My recent casework suggests that my local education authority is reluctant to implement co-ordinated support plans and will call any other plan anything but a CSP that has statutory underpinning. We have made referrals to the Enquire advice service, which has helped my constituents who seek additional support needs services and parents who want to establish co-ordinated support plans. I would welcome the cabinet secretary's assessment of the position and ask her to outline the Scottish Government's guidance on ensuring consistency of approach across local authority areas on determining which plans are relevant in—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Ms Adamson. The cabinet secretary has got the gist of your question.

Jenny Gilruth: I welcome the fact that support has been provided by the Enquire service, which is funded by the Scottish Government. Members have raised several points about the statutory responsibilities of local authorities; I need to be mindful of the position. Local authorities hold the legislative responsibility to deliver our education services. However, we need to work in partnership with them, which is why I mentioned the education assurance board in a number of my earlier responses. The approach that we have set out allows local authorities to respond to the individual needs of their children and young people accordingly. If the member were able to share

more information with me on the specific issue that she has raised, I would be happy to engage with her on that.

Through the budget, we are putting in the extra funding that I mentioned. We are also providing an extra £15 million per year and, separately, £11 million to directly support pupils with complex additional support needs and provide services to children and families. The member spoke to some of that work, which is being delivered via Enquire.

Maths (Secondary Schools)

5. Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the action being taken to support maths learning in secondary schools. (S6O-04470)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): Education Scotland is leading the curriculum improvement cycle, which aims to strengthen the curriculum for pupils aged from three to 18, improve attainment, and support a more consistent teaching and learning experience for our young people.

Given that maths is a national priority, the national maths specialist is assisting Education Scotland, local authorities and the teaching profession in reviewing the maths curriculum. In parallel, Education Scotland, with support from the Scottish Government, is providing professional learning packages to teachers to achieve further improvements in the teaching of maths and numeracy across all stages. We are also investing to maximise the number of maths teachers.

Audrey Nicoll: The importance of having maths qualifications for young people who seek to enter the renewables industry and other sectors in Scotland cannot be overstated. I was lucky enough to discuss maths learning with a group of modern apprentices during my recent visit to North East Scotland College to celebrate Scottish apprenticeship week. Will the cabinet secretary outline what more can be done to support regional colleges to engage with school-age children, to showcase how maths and numeracy are used in a multitude of engaging and dynamic ways in vocational careers such as engineering and construction, and to show how more people can benefit from colleges' strong links with industry in their delivery of training?

Jenny Gilruth: I hope that all members were engaged in activities for Scottish apprenticeship week, which was held recently and which offers an opportunity to celebrate the importance of apprenticeships. On the specifics of the member's question, our colleges plan their course provision in line with the needs of their local areas. In my area, Fife College works closely with our schools

to establish such partnerships and works with industry more broadly.

The Scottish Government has provided investment through the developing the young workforce initiative. Since 2014, we have seen a sizeable increase in the numbers of young people who achieve vocational and technical qualifications. In 2022-23, 30.4 per cent of school leavers gained such qualifications at level 5 or above, which is certainly welcome news.

Additional Support Needs (School Placements)

6. Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what support there is for the parents or guardians of children and young people with additional support needs who require a specific school placement. (S6O-04471)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): All children and young people should learn in an environment that best suits their needs. Our education authorities are responsible for setting school admission policies, which will include details of how to make placing requests, the procedures for dealing with parental placing requests and the associated appeals processes.

Education authorities also have a duty to comply with placing requests from parents when their child has additional support needs, unless specific exemptions apply. The Government funds the Enquire service to provide advice to parents on the placing request system and how those decisions can be appealed.

Fulton MacGregor: I welcome the recent investment from the Scottish Government for the "Let's talk ASN" service, which had been suspended towards the end of last year. What assurance can the cabinet secretary give that the service, which is valued by many of my constituents as well as by many others across the country, will remain available, especially when more parents and carers increasingly require support for children in ASN settings?

Jenny Gilruth: The "Let's talk ASN" service provides a vital advocacy and legal representation service to families when there is a dispute about additional support for learning. Following demand-led pressures in autumn last year, the service reopened on 3 January, and any cases that could not be addressed during the period in which the service was temporarily suspended have been offered free legal advice.

To ensure that the service will continue to meet demand, we have increased the funding that will be available to it through a new contract, which will begin in April. We will also continue to work closely with the service contractor, Govan Law

Centre, to monitor demand and ensure that it is met.

We are not aware of any referrals being turned away since the service reopened, but if the member would like to share any details or has any further information on that, I would be more than happy to consider the matter.

Wellbeing (School Pupils and Staff)

7. Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what work it is carrying out with local authorities regarding the wellbeing of school pupils and staff. (S6O-04472)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): The wellbeing of staff and pupils is an absolute priority for the Scottish Government. As well as our continued investment of £16 million a year to support school counselling services, we have recently re-established the mental health in schools working group to consider relevant advice about children and young people's mental health.

We are also working with the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland to establish a national health and wellbeing group that will bring together good practice and build a comprehensive and consistent wellbeing offer for school staff across all local authorities. The group will meet this spring.

Elena Whitham: Recently, I have received a worrying increase in casework contacts relating to young people who are experiencing bullying in school, and relating to bullied young people not feeling safe to attend school, which is causing their learning experience to be significantly disrupted. Those young people and their parents or guardians tell me that they do not believe that the young persons' experiences have been listened to or acted on, while the instigators appear to experience few consequences for their actions and continue to remain in school.

I fully recognise that competing needs of all individuals in the school campus need to be considered and that there are usually underlying issues that lead to such behaviour, but does the cabinet secretary agree that no pupil, teacher or member of staff should have to suffer abuse in our schools? Can she advise on what can be done to ensure that local authorities and, indeed, heads of education are held accountable, in that regard?

Jenny Gilruth: I am absolutely clear that no pupil, teacher or member of staff should have to suffer abuse in our schools. Our schools need to be safe and consistent learning environments for all.

In November, we published updated anti-bullying guidance that makes very clear our expectations of schools and local authorities on preventing and responding to bullying. I am especially mindful of the corrosive impact of disinformation, which I spoke about previously today, and online hate, in relation to our young people's experience of their education.

In January, I visited Cathkin high school to talk about the new digital discourse initiative that has been created by the Time for Inclusive Education group and ISD Global. That resource specifically provides practical strategies and curriculum tools to help schools to counter the effects of online hate and disinformation on young people, and to challenge and address those issues in schools.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Sue Webber has a brief supplementary question.

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): Cabinet secretary, in relation to your comments on digital and online resources and online hate, a parent in Edinburgh has revealed that secondary 1 pupils have been sharing extreme content, including pornography and violent videos, while at school, which is leaving her son distressed and suffering from nightmares. Despite growing concerns, the Scottish Government has only issued guidance, which that mother says is simply not enough.

Given the clear impact on students' wellbeing, cabinet secretary, do you think that schools should be left to handle the issue alone, or will the Government finally acknowledge best practice and take responsibility for introducing a national ban on mobile phones in schools?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Always speak through the chair.

Sue Webber: I apologise.

Jenny Gilruth: I thank the member for her question. She alluded to the guidance that we publish on mobile phones. She also spoke about an issue in relation to her constituent accessing content on a phone, I think, during the school day. The mobile phone guidance that we published in August—not very long ago, at all—goes as far as I am legally able to go, as a minister in the Scottish Government. The Scottish Government does not have the power to introduce a national ban on mobile phones: that power rests with local authorities.

I am more than happy to raise the issue directly with the City of Edinburgh Council, if that would appease the member on the issues that she has raised today. I recognise her strength of feeling, but the national guidance goes as far as I am able to go, at present.

Scottish Digital Academy

8. Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what impact the Scottish digital academy is having on improving digital skills in Scotland. (S6O-04473)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): The Scottish digital academy is central to transforming Scotland's public services through the development of digital skills and workforce capability. However, that sits within the business portfolio.

As part of the education and skills portfolio, options are being explored to expand e-Sgoil as part of the national e-learning offer, in order to deliver on the national digital academy commitment to broaden curricular choice and pathways for young people in our schools, through facilitating delivery of some national qualifications and vocational qualifications online. Although that is not explicitly about developing digital skills, it will support young people in improving their digital literacy.

In addition, digital literacy is being considered as a cross-curricular theme in the curriculum improvement cycle. That will clarify and strengthen the position and alignment of digital literacy in our curriculum areas in order to better support learners' needs.

Willie Coffey: According to ScotlandIS, something like 13,000 new vacancies in digital technologies are created every year, with the number rising year on year. There is a worldwide shortage of software developers, at a time when the digital revolution is having more and more of an impact on our daily lives. Salaries are pretty good, and the industry and careers can be exciting, variable and long lasting.

With that in mind, will the cabinet secretary say more about how we in Scotland can capitalise on that demand, and encourage more of our younger people to take up software development at school and join that dynamic and fantastic industry?

Jenny Gilruth: The Scottish Government very much recognises the critical role of software development in driving innovation and in relation to economic growth and the jobs that it will inevitably provide in the future, for the next generation.

We are working closely to inspire more young people to pursue careers in technology by investing in digital education, which I spoke about previously, and by strengthening the pathways into the sector. We have initiatives such as Techscaler, the coding boot camps and partnerships with industry, which are helping to build a skilled workforce.

More broadly, my colleague Mr Dey is leading on some of our interesting work in relation to the careers collaboratives, which will provide for young people a strengthened offering in relation to future job opportunities in the sector.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes portfolio questions on education and skills. There will be a short pause before we move on to the next item of business.

Salmon Farming

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-16852, in the name of Finlay Carson, on behalf of the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee, on salmon farming in Scotland. I would be grateful if members who wish to speak in the debate were to press their request-to-speak buttons.

14:58

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries)

(Con): I am pleased to open the debate on behalf of the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee and to speak to the findings of our follow-up inquiry into salmon farming in Scotland.

I begin by thanking all committee members, the clerks and Scottish Parliament information centre staff for their diligent work throughout the inquiry, and in producing what I think is a thoughtful and balanced report on a subject that can often attract very polarised opinions.

We took evidence on our inquiry from June to October last year, hearing from a range of stakeholders who are involved in the industry, as well as from regulators and the Scottish Government. In September, we carried out a fact-finding visit to Oban, where we held a community engagement event, visited a marine research facility and went to see a local fish farm. On behalf of the committee, I thank the many stakeholders who provided evidence, written and in person, to us over the course of our inquiry.

Our main focus was to follow up on the recommendations in the 2018 inquiry report “Salmon Farming in Scotland” by our predecessors in the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee. We aimed to understand whether, seven years on, the Scottish Government has been successful in efforts to place the industry on a more sustainable footing. We assessed progress across four main themes: fish health and welfare, environmental impacts, interactions between farmed and wild salmon, and the location of salmon farms.

Overall, our committee found that, although positive steps have been taken on some of the key findings of the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee report, in most areas, the sector still has a way to go to realise the ambitions that that report set out. It is evident that recommended changes to regulation and enforcement of the industry have not been taken forward with the urgency that was called for in 2018, and we believe that that presents a barrier to securing the long-term viability of the industry. At the end of my contribution, I will set out some of the steps that our committee believes need to be taken, but for

now I will touch on a selection of our report’s key findings.

The industry’s record on fish mortality rightly attracted a lot of scrutiny by the committee. We were disappointed that the industry had been unable to significantly reduce its overall mortality rate, which remained roughly the same as it was in 2018, at around 25 per cent. However, I was encouraged by recent figures from Salmon Scotland that suggested that there would be a drop in mortality rate to about 18 per cent this year. The committee will be watching eagerly to see whether that progress can be sustained.

We also heard that the operating conditions for fish farmers have become harder in recent years as a result of the emergence of new environmental challenges, such as micro jellyfish and other harmful impacts of rising sea temperatures from climate change.

The committee suggested three interventions that could help to support a further reduction in farm-fish mortality over the longer term. The first is to commission more research into the environmental causes of mortality to help the industry get ahead of future problems as they emerge. Secondly, we want to achieve greater transparency by enhancing how mortality data is collected and published by the Scottish Government, through the introduction of mandatory reporting requirements. Finally, where farms are consistently failing to control mortality at their sites, the committee believes that the regulations must secure improvements in performance. That is why we have called on the Scottish Government to provide new powers for regulators to limit or halt production at sites that record persistently high mortality rates, and for those criteria to be set out in collaboration with the industry.

It is regrettable that the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands did not support the committee’s proposal for mandatory reporting, on the basis that it would be an additional burden on the sector.

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP):

Does the member recognise, acknowledge and welcome the fact that, since 2018—seven years ago—the sector as a whole has invested a staggering £1,000 million in addressing many of the issues that he raised? It has increased survival rates to a four-year high, and sea lice rates are at an historic low.

Finlay Carson: Absolutely. We recognise that the industry has gone some way in innovating and looking at how it can tackle some of the challenges. Of most concern to the committee was whether the rate at which climate change challenges are being addressed is effective.

During our visit, we learned that fish farms already collect a lot of data for onsite audits and management purposes. The cabinet secretary's position on mandatory reporting is even more concerning, given what I have said about the need to improve regulatory oversight of farms when it comes to mortality. We do not believe that reporting would be an additional burden, given that much of that data is already being collected.

However, the cabinet secretary has not completely rejected our proposals for new enforcement powers but has said that further analytical work is required before she can come to a view on that. I hope that, in her contribution to the debate, she will elaborate on precisely what that work will entail and when it will be completed.

The committee was also concerned to hear that specific welfare standards for farmed fish are set voluntarily rather than required by regulation. The committee feels that it is time, and that it would be good for the industry, which often goes above and beyond statutory requirements in other areas, for the statutory regime to keep pace with knowledge about what constitutes good fish welfare.

That was communicated to the committee in great detail in the evidence that was provided to us by the likes of Professor Lynne Sneddon and the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. For that reason, the committee recommends that the Scottish Government introduces new regulations to set specific baseline standards for farmed fish. Those standards exist for most other farmed animals, so why not for farmed fish? The cabinet secretary said that that recommendation would require further analysis and that she would update us on what she intends to do in September. Again, I hope that, in her remarks today, she will say more about exactly what that analysis will look like.

The committee was also pleased to see that the industry is making improvements with regard to reducing sea lice. That progress has, in part, been made by tightening the enforcement thresholds and by the introduction of mandatory reporting of sea lice counts. That is to be welcomed, but it makes me question even more why the cabinet secretary seems so reluctant to take a similar approach to tackling fish mortality.

The committee also took evidence from the Scottish Environment Protection Agency on the changes that have been made since 2018 to the regulatory framework for controlling the amount of waste that is discharged from fish farms. We are supportive of the revised regulatory framework and of the additional monitoring of the sea bed that it requires, but significant gaps in knowledge and understanding about the environmental footprint of salmon farming, which were identified

back in 2018, remain, largely due to the lack of scientific evidence.

To address those gaps, the committee feels that there is a case for the Scottish Government to establish research pens to develop scientific evidence about the environmental impacts of salmon farming and how those can be reduced. The cabinet secretary seems to agree with that in principle and said that the Scottish Government would take forward further discussions on that.

The interactions between farmed and wild salmon are another area on which the committee felt that minimal progress has been made since 2018. Shortly after the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee inquiry, the Scottish Government commissioned a working group to review its policies on the issue. However, the former chair of the group told the committee that the Scottish Government had implemented only one of the group's 42 recommendations. The committee is disappointed by that and has said that a clear timetable for delivering those recommendations is urgently needed. In response to the committee's report, the Scottish Government has now provided more information on the status of each recommendation, but that seems to be more of an update on progress, with minimal detail on the timescales for the recommendations to be delivered.

The committee noted that the industry felt the most frustration about the difficulty of navigating the consenting and planning process for the siting of new salmon farms. In 2018, the REC Committee called for immediate dialogue between the Scottish Government and the industry to develop a mechanism to allow farms to relocate to sites that are more likely to promote good fish welfare and allow for the mitigation of environmental impacts. It is disappointing that there is no evidence that those discussions have taken place, and the committee recommends that that is now progressed as a matter of urgency, alongside a detailed analysis and assessment of the potential risks that that could have for fish health and welfare and of the economic and social impacts on fish farm staff and communities.

Time is short and I have managed to cover only a fraction of the report, but I will conclude by saying this: in light of the lack of progress in certain areas over the past seven years, the committee seriously considered recommending a moratorium or pause on new salmon farms or on the expansion of existing farms. However, the committee agreed to give the Scottish Government one year to implement our recommendations and for that work stream to have dedicated ministerial oversight to ensure delivery.

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): Finlay Carson makes an important point about the fact that the committee wants to see progress within one year, but can he tell us exactly what the committee believes are the measurable actions that need to be delivered in those 12 months and what process the committee will undertake to measure and assess whether the concerns have been adequately addressed at the end of that period?

The Presiding Officer: Please answer and conclude, convener.

Finlay Carson: We take those points on board. It is very important that, before the 12 months are up, the committee has the opportunity to see whether there has been satisfactory progress. We now have a timetable, but we have to ensure that the Government actually sticks to that.

The committee had hoped that our report would be a wake-up call for the Scottish Government and that it would see that its current approach is not working. However, having read the cabinet secretary's response, I cannot help but feel a bit dismayed about how few of the committee's recommendations the Scottish Government has committed to act on.

I also struggle to see the Scottish Government acknowledge the seriousness of the challenges that the industry faces. That is important, because it is vital that the sector can overcome those challenges so that we can continue to enjoy the benefits that salmon farming brings to the Scottish economy and to support the jobs and economic development that it provides in rural communities. I am sure that we can all agree on that.

In the spirit of the report, I hope that the cabinet secretary will listen carefully to the feedback from members across the chamber this afternoon about how we can build a more sustainable and prosperous salmon farming sector in Scotland. I look forward to hearing the contributions of all members but, for now, I commend our report to the Parliament.

I move,

That the Parliament notes the conclusions and recommendations contained in the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee's 1st Report, 2025 (Session 6), *Follow-up inquiry into salmon farming in Scotland* (SP Paper 720).

The Presiding Officer: Thank you. Before I call the cabinet secretary, members might wish to be aware that we do have a little time in hand this afternoon.

15:10

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands (Mairi Gougeon): First, I am grateful to the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee

for its thorough exploration of the issues that salmon farming faces and for members' consideration of the progress that has been made since the "Salmon farming in Scotland" report of December 2018. I do want to address a comment that the convener, Finlay Carson, has just made by saying that the Scottish Government does take the report's recommendations very seriously and has given consideration to them.

Secondly, I am grateful for the opportunity that the debate brings to discuss those matters more broadly across Parliament, to outline the key work that we as a Government have delivered since that initial report and to discuss our response to the committee's recommendations in more detail.

In 2023, I published the "Vision for Sustainable Aquaculture", which sets out our ambitions for the sustainable development of the aquaculture sector. The sector provides invaluable benefits for our nation, particularly the coastal and island communities where it operates. Our vision sets out how we see that sector developing, operating within environmental limits and supporting our local communities and economies.

Last year, Scottish salmon was once again the United Kingdom's top food export, achieving a record high of £844 million-worth of exports. The sector contributes significantly to our economy, with around 2,300 people directly employed and many more employed throughout its supply chain, covering a variety of different disciplines such as fish health, engineering, feed, vessels and equipment manufacture.

Salmon production largely takes place in our Highlands, rural areas and islands, where it provides high-value, high-skill, long-term employment opportunities that contribute to the on-going vibrancy and vitality of those communities. The committee heard evidence on the wide range of community benefits that the sector brings, including the direct and indirect jobs that it generates and sustains, the provision of housing, financial and in-kind support to local projects and community interests, and the underpinning of populations.

As we work to tackle the climate crisis and grow Scotland's economy, we are looking to enable the sector's sustainable development. I know that the committee will share my view, set out in our vision, that economic benefit must not come at the expense of our environment. Our strong regulatory framework already provides the important safeguards that are necessary to preserve our environment now and into the future.

We know, however, and would agree, that there is always more to do. Our policies and regulations should always be informed by the best available science and evidence. I hope that members

across the chamber agree that it is important that our interventions are evidence based and that they balance proportionate regulatory improvements to protect our natural environment against the impact that regulation could have on the sector's economic potential.

I am sure that all members are aware that salmon farming is a sector that attracts many and varied stakeholder opinions.

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): It has been more than a year since the Long Loch Salmon semi-closed containment project was called in for a decision by the Scottish Government. We are talking about economic development, but the length of time spent waiting on a decision reflects badly on the planning system and could discourage investment in Scotland; indeed, the company still has no indication as to when a decision could be made. Can the cabinet secretary help in that regard?

Mairi Gougeon: Unfortunately, I am not in a position to provide Beatrice Wishart with an update on that. As I hope that she can appreciate, I am not the minister responsible for dealing with that. However, I know that the report and its recommendations are being given full and proper consideration, and I am sure that a decision will be made as soon as possible.

It is absolutely right that all sectors, including salmon farming, are scrutinised and held to account. However, in the case of salmon farming, in which polarised opinions are, as we know, commonplace, it is more important than ever that we take the time to collaborate to shape and deliver policies that ultimately bring people and communities together, rather than divide them.

Fergus Ewing: [*Made a request to intervene.*]

Mairi Gougeon: I am happy to take an intervention.

Fergus Ewing: I am very grateful to the cabinet secretary for giving way. Does the cabinet secretary agree that the Griggs report's main recommendation of having a lead individual responsible for driving forward progress, as is the case in Norway, and ensuring that consents, for example, are dealt with swiftly, as they are in Norway, would help achieve the objectives that she has set out?

Mairi Gougeon: First, I appreciate the work that Professor Griggs undertook and his recommendations. We are taking forward work through the consenting task group to look specifically at his recommendation on consents and to address the challenges in that respect, because we know that that process can be more straightforward. I am looking forward to the update

on the consenting task group's work, which is due shortly.

Returning to my comments on polarisation and the different views on salmon farming, we must, in the work that we are taking forward, collaborate and consult, and that takes time. I absolutely recognise the committee's call for the Government to act urgently in this area, but there is a need to build consensus on the way forward and, as far as possible, build relationships. Focusing too much on pace will not necessarily lead to good outcomes.

Finlay Carson: I appreciate the cabinet secretary giving way to me, because I know that she is not really getting into her flow with all of these interventions.

However, we have heard from the salmon industry that Scottish salmon farmers provide the highest animal welfare standards across the world. The industry already collects a lot of mortality data, so there should be no extra burden in that respect. One of the reasons for the polarisation that she referred to is a lack of confidence in the figures being provided, but surely if we were to put that on a statutory basis, it would give a far better understanding of how the industry is performing.

Mairi Gougeon: Finlay Carson is absolutely right about the transparency of the information that is provided. More information is provided for salmon farming than for any other sector. However, I recognise that there are difficulties in translating how some of that data can be used and in how it is communicated.

I make it clear that I would not hesitate to take action or introduce regulation, if there were a problem with getting that information in the first place. However, there are no issues there. It brings me back to the point that any regulation that we bring forward has to be proportionate, and that is why, as I said to the committee, I do not intend to introduce any regulations in that regard. My response to the committee carefully prioritises what I believe is achievable not only for Government but, importantly, for the range of partners that we work with. We need to be cognisant of the cumulative impact of our work programmes on all stakeholders.

Another factor that impacts on delivery and which affects Government in its entirety is the ongoing challenge of ensuring that we manage effectively within our means. That means prioritising how and when we take work forward. I want to be open and transparent about the balance that Government is trying to strike to ensure that we are delivering on the most important issues, and it means that, while we work within resource constraints, we have to continue to make careful and difficult prioritisation decisions.

Another key point of the committee's considerations that I want to address—and which the convener, Finlay Carson, has touched on—is the reference to and talk of moratoriums on either new sites or expansion at existing sites. Despite the finding from the previous committee's work that there was “insufficient evidence to support” a moratorium on future development, and despite the fact that significant progress has been made since those inquiries, I am disappointed that the committee has signalled that it would like to revisit the issue in a year's time. I welcome that the committee has outlined that it would not support a moratorium at this time—albeit that that position was not, I recognise, supported by all members—but there should be no question about whether we want salmon farming in Scotland. We do.

Any move towards some sort of moratorium would deprive Scotland of the benefits of salmon farming for our economy and our communities, without adequate justification that the potential environmental harms were not being managed appropriately. A moratorium could stifle the very investment in science and innovation that will ultimately support fish health and environmental and productivity goals.

We are committed to ensuring that Scotland is a good place to do business, with effective but proportionate regulation that protects our environment now and in the future. We take matters of fish health and welfare and the protection of our environment seriously, and I hope that my response to the committee is clear on those issues and provides an insight into what work is being prioritised and when, in the context of our work plan.

What I hope that I have also managed to convey in my response is openness and transparency about the Government's intentions, and that we are being absolutely clear about what work we intend to deliver, when we will deliver it and why. Having set that out and having carefully considered our response to the committee's findings, I hope that colleagues across the chamber can see that we have committed to a number of actions across all areas and that we take the committee's time, deliberations and recommendations seriously.

We have already made significant progress on key areas, including reducing environmental impact, improving fish health and streamlining planning and consenting. Beyond that progress, I have, in my response to the committee, committed to a range of further actions. Although I do not have time to cover all of them this afternoon, I want to set out some of the priorities that we are taking forward.

We will explore with partners how the existing data collections that we have touched on today

can be better presented and how accessibility can be enhanced, including through improvements to the Scotland's Aquaculture website. We are working to analyse mortality data, exploring thresholds for persistent high mortality and whether fish farms with persistent high mortality actually exist. Based on the evidence that the committee received, we will be undertaking an analysis of options, including statutory and other alternatives, to understand how improved welfare standards can best be supported.

The detail of those commitments is broad and is set out in our written response to the committee, but I hope that what I have set out briefly today shows that we are listening, we are acting and we are continuing to make progress.

In drawing to a close, I thank committee members again for their in-depth consideration of the matters. I look forward to keeping the committee updated as we make further progress across the important areas to ensure that we continue to support the sector's development, to operate within environmental limits and to deliver the range of social and economic benefits that we know that it brings.

15:21

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I am delighted to be able to open this debate on behalf of the Scottish Conservatives. Before I go any further, I remind Parliament of my entry in the register of members' interests, which states that I have an interest in a wild salmon fishery. I have had that interest for 45 years, during which time I have been involved in watching salmon farming around the coasts of Scotland.

I, too, would like to thank committee members for all the work that they have done. I know how difficult it has been, as I have been there before, when the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee considered the issue in 2018.

As a Conservative, I support businesses. I support businesses that bring a great deal to Scotland's economy in terms of employment and opportunities, and in terms of our balance of payments. However, we must be clear that those businesses cannot do that at any price.

It would be wrong to scoot past without reminding members of the fable of “The Emperor's New Clothes”. Members will recall that, in that story, events resulted in the Emperor going out undressed because people were incompetent and gullible and pretended not to know what was going on. I am none of those things and, when it comes to salmon farming, I will not be any of those things.

In 2018, the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee told this Parliament that there were things wrong with salmon farming. It made 65 recommendations, and I am disappointed that the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee, having looked at some of those recommendations again, is having to acknowledge that a lot of them have not been complied with.

I remember sitting on the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee and hearing calls for a moratorium on salmon farming. In the end, two members dissented from the part of the report in which we did not call for a moratorium. I was one of those who did not want a moratorium, but my position might have changed.

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): [*Made a request to intervene.*]

Edward Mountain: I will give way to my colleague Jamie Greene, who I think was on that committee.

Jamie Greene: I was keen to listen to today's debate, and I indeed sat alongside the member during the deliberations on that report all those years ago. I am still surprised to hear that many of the report's recommendations have not been implemented or fully addressed. I find that deeply disappointing. I hope that the Government will respond to that in the closing speech.

Edward Mountain: I share the member's disappointment.

If I had known where we would be today, I would have joined those committee members who called for a moratorium in 2018, because that would have made the industry pay attention. I will explain why we need it to do so.

The figures for 2023 show that 33,000 tonnes of salmon died that year, and that the use of antibiotics was still going up at that stage—in fact, according to the Veterinary Medicines Directorate, there has been a 24 per cent increase since 2017. The industry will say that the level went down the following year, but the issue is that, overall, the use of antibiotics is still rising.

Let us look at the figures from 2024. Mowi lost 600,000 fish in the first nine months of the year, and it was closely followed by Bakkafrost, which lost 543,000. A huge amount of fish is being lost, and I do not believe that there should be any excuse for it. I am a farmer so I know what it is like: I know that, where there is breeding and where farming goes on, there is also a certain amount of dying.

Let us be clear, however: the fish that are put to sea—and 25 per cent of them are dying when they are put to sea—are probably the most mollycoddled animals that you could have. They are given treatment before they go out to sea, to

stop them getting sea lice, and they are looked after carefully in the pens.

Mairi Gougeon: I appreciate what members have said so far today about the fish mortalities and I do not think that anybody is willing to accept the current level of mortalities. However, does the member accept that some of the reasons that can lead to such mass mortality events, such as algal blooms, micro jellyfish or the other issues that have emerged, can be outwith the salmon farmers' control?

Edward Mountain: Of course I accept that fact—as a farmer, I am well aware of it. Let me give an example: on the farm, sometimes we get blackleg. If that happens, it will kill the animals, so we stop producing the animals in that area, move them to a different area, reduce our stocking and look for ways to prevent the disease. The problem is that the salmon industry has not been doing those things; it just keeps going.

Mairi Gougeon: Will the member take another intervention?

Edward Mountain: I will take one more if I have time.

Mairi Gougeon: In the evidence that the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee heard, there was one example of a specific mortality event that happened because of micro jellyfish, which were not seen again for another 20 years. Does the member accept that what he is suggesting would not work in that type of situation?

Edward Mountain: I accept that there need to be adaptable controls in particular areas. The Kishorn A, B and C sites continually have a high mortality rate, which calls into question whether the approach is appropriate.

The Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee demanded that mortality should be reduced—it was clear about that in its recommendations. When I attended that committee—I attended nearly every single session—we heard from the industry that it was predicting a reduction in mortality in fish farms of only 2 per cent each year.

The figure that has been quoted today was based on the mortality rate in 2018. Let us go back to 2017, when the mortality rate was 17 per cent. If we are to get back to that rate of 17 per cent but the industry is only going to reduce mortality by 2 per cent a year, that means that we will have to wait 19 years to get back to a mortality rate that was judged by the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee to be unacceptable.

The Rural Affairs and Islands Committee's recommendations are commendable. I like the idea of a road map—I am disappointed that we never had one before for the Rural Economy and

Connectivity Committee's 65 recommendations. I am pleased that the data on fish mortality is to be much more open and consistent, and that there is more concern about waste discharge. Across all these committees and all these reports, what we are trying to achieve is for the industry to be a good neighbour—not just for wild salmon but for the other industries that work around their pens.

For the industry to succeed—and I really want it to succeed—it will have to be much more open and transparent than it is at the moment. It will have to show considerable improvements.

I caution the industry against sending letters such as the one that it sent to the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee after the committee published its report. I believe that such letters are threatening. I do not like being threatened by the industry and I do not think that any parliamentary committee should be threatened. We need to make sure that we build on the report through consensus.

Denial and defence by threatening are not going to save the industry. I believe that the industry is in the last-chance saloon. It has had two strikes from two separate committees in the Parliament. I hope that the industry will succeed, but it will have to do a lot more than it is doing at the moment if it is to remain as it is.

15:29

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab):

The Rural Affairs and Islands Committee's report was difficult to compile, because it represents an appraisal of changes that were put in place following the report by its predecessor, the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee. It was difficult to measure change, because the challenges that the industry faces today are different from those that it faced when the previous report was written. However, we found that there had been no significant change with regard to transparency, regulation and governance. Even though salmon farming faces even greater challenges today, it appears that little progress has been made since the REC Committee's report.

It is for the Government to improve regulation and reporting, but, time and again, we discovered information that had not been published in a timely fashion. Although that information is gathered, it is not transparently or accessibly available. That feeds negativity towards the industry. I welcome the fact that, in her response to the committee's report, the cabinet secretary admitted that and agreed to look at how such information could be made more freely available.

There are members of the committee and of the wider public who would like there to be a

moratorium on all fish farm development. If they were honest, they would admit that they want to close down the industry altogether, but they forget that fish farming provides benefits. We need food, especially oily fish, which salmon farming provides. In rural parts of Scotland, where such farms are based, there is also a need for the jobs that the industry provides.

Recently, I read in the *West Highland Free Press* that a company in Skye, Organic Sea Harvest, has stopped farming at two of its farms in Skye, which will lead to the loss of 16 jobs in a part of Skye where local population retention is really challenging. That is the number of people who are directly employed by the company, but I fear that more jobs will be lost downstream in local support industries. In an already overheated tourism and second-home market, in which local people struggle to get a foothold in the housing market, such jobs are essential in allowing them to do so.

From press reports, I understand that the reason why the company has stopped farming at those farms is to do with our slow and clunky planning process, with blame lying at the door of Highland Council and the Scottish Government. We are talking about a small local company that the Government should be supporting, which has fallen foul of a complex and expensive bureaucracy. It is little wonder, therefore, that most of the aquaculture industry is now owned by large multinationals, which have deep pockets and patient capital to see them through the planning process. The situation must change, because those jobs are crucial to our local economy.

Good governance not only is transparent but cuts bureaucracy and makes trading easier, without cutting standards. Good governance also protects our international reputation and the reputation of the fish farming industry. Therefore, the Government is failing the industry and those who work in it by not acting on the concerns.

I was brought up in a rural area, where the arrival of a fish farm provided permanent well-paid jobs that allowed young people to buy a home and stay in the community in which they had been brought up. We need more of that. We cannot simply hand over such communities as playgrounds for the rich, but the lack of good governance structures means that it is close to impossible for small companies to succeed. The planning system sets communities against one another and creates time lags that only those with the deepest pockets can survive.

The industry is also impacted by climate change, but the Scottish Government's marine laboratories have been all but hollowed out. We need research and development to take place to ensure that the industry is world leading, rather

than being left to wither. We saw what a catastrophic effect the micro jellyfish had. What research was carried out to identify that up-and-coming challenge before it arose?

Mairi Gougeon: Does the member recognise that, in addition to the significant investment that the industry makes in research and innovation, we provided funding to the Scottish Aquaculture Innovation Centre to do the very work that she is suggesting needs to be done to tackle those challenges? There needs to be broader recognition of that.

Rhoda Grant: I recognise that, but those catastrophes happen and have really damaging impacts on the industry and on the international reputation of one of our largest exports, so we must do more and foresee the challenges that global warming is bringing.

It was sad to see that the public and media response to the catastrophe caused by the micro jellyfish was to pillory the industry. When there have been on-land farming disasters such as foot-and-mouth disease and, more recently, bird flu and Schmallenberg virus, there has rightly been empathy and care for those who have worked hard to raise flocks and herds and have faced devastating losses. However, there is no such empathy or sympathy for those who work on fish farms—it is almost as though people believe that they deliberately set out to bring that catastrophe on themselves.

When the Scottish Government responded to the committee's concerns about climate change impacts, it highlighted work on issues that have already played out to a certain extent, but we need to look at future proofing, consider what changes are likely to occur and prepare for them. Otherwise, there will be more catastrophic impacts on the industry in the future.

The report looked at wrasse, which were brought in as a response to the previous committee report that focused on sea lice. Wrasse are a natural way of dealing with sea lice, because they are a type of cleaner fish that eat the lice. The value of those wrasse actually exceeds that of farmed salmon, so we must protect them, because they are doing a job in protecting salmon but are, all too often, simply discarded at harvest time. The committee recommended that a fisheries management plan or other protective action should be developed to stop the overfishing of wrasse and to look after their welfare at harvest time.

We also looked at spatial management of the sea, which is a subject that comes up far too often in the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee. The many competing pressures on our seas are not being managed. Those pressures relate to

aquaculture, fishing, leisure and energy transmission and generation, so we need a zonal approach to planning on our seas to ensure that there is room for everybody and that people can continue with their businesses. Another issue that came up in the report was that fish farms should be able to move out of the way of things such as micro jellyfish, but the fact that planning is so cumbersome makes that nigh-on impossible.

The report is clear that the Scottish Government is letting the industry down. If we are to continue to reap the rewards of a world-renowned product, we must get governance and transparency right. The committee has set a deadline for that and has left the door open to return to the topic next year. I hope that the Government will now act to ensure that we do not have to do that.

15:38

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): Scotland's seas are being sacrificed for profit. Beneath the surface of our lochs and waters, the salmon farming industry leaves a trail of pollution, suffering and harm to our coastal communities. That is not the Scotland that we want to hand over to future generations.

When the committee published our report, we laid out a clear and urgent call for action to protect our seas and marine life and the people who depend on them, but the Government's response has been little more than empty words and half measures. My views are made clear in our committee's recommendations: we must pause expansion and new farms until the industry cleans up its act. That is not about shutting the industry down; a pause would give us the time to strengthen regulations, protect our environment and safeguard Scotland's international reputation.

Finlay Carson: Can Ariane Burgess tell me what impact assessment her Green colleagues have made regarding the knock-on effect of having a pause in the industry, or has that just been asked for on a whim?

Ariane Burgess: I will go on to outline that. My greatest concern is for our communities, which are dependent on that industry and will be left with nothing when it collapses in the face of climate change.

The Government claims that it has made considerable progress since 2018, but how can we possibly share that optimism when the evidence tells us a different story? With rising sea temperatures driven by climate change, the days of salmon farming in Scotland as we know it are numbered. The latest Marine Climate Change Impacts Partnership report says that warmer waters mean that mortality is going to increase in

our farms. Either we force the industry to change or it will be finished.

With colleagues, I have called for stronger regulation, transparency and accountability. The committee heard clear evidence of farmed salmon dying in shocking numbers. Mortality rates have soared from 7 per cent a decade ago to 25 per cent today. That means that one in four farmed salmon die before they reach harvest. When we add the freshwater stage into the reporting, one in three salmon suffer and die before they reach people's plates, yet the Government still refuses to implement comprehensive mortality reporting, ignoring cleaner fish and the freshwater stage entirely. Without full transparency, how can we possibly hold the industry to account?

The Government insists that missing data and no counts will not be tolerated in the future. However, just this week, reports revealed that one farm completed the required sea lice count while another that is less than 3km away claimed that it could not do so due to the weather. The system is failing, and the Government's assurances about future enforcement simply carry no weight.

With colleagues, I have called for greater welfare protections for our fish, which can feel pain just as other animals and our pets do. Our neighbouring nations have moved towards higher welfare standards while Scotland clings to voluntary schemes that leave millions of fish unprotected.

I have called for greater protections for cleaner fish—the wrasse and lumpfish that are used to control lice. Those species are taken from the wild and placed into cages by the millions, only to die in appalling conditions. That is wholly unethical. We do not even have public data on how many wrasse are being caught and where.

With colleagues, I have called for effective monitoring of marine discharges—the chemicals, waste and pollution that flow into our seas. Years are going unchecked, yet the numbers are not small, given that the waste from one farm can be equivalent to that of a town of 49,000 people. How have we allowed an industry to grow so huge without even knowing its full impact?

With colleagues, I have called for accountability on farm escapes. Recently, Iceland fined a company more than £650,000 when 80,000 farmed salmon escaped, yet the same incident in Scotland had no consequences. It took two years even to come to light, because there is still no legal requirement for transporters to report farmed fish escapes. Scotland has fallen behind countries such as Iceland, Norway and Canada, where stricter regulations and tougher enforcement hold salmon farms to account.

The salmon farming industry boasts of economic benefits, yet in 35 years it has directly created just 253 full-time jobs in the Highlands and Islands. Let us be clear that this is not a jobs boom; it is a false promise. Meanwhile, the industry's pollution threatens the real livelihoods of our coastal communities—the fishers, the marine tour guides and the small businesses that rely on healthy seas.

While Scotland claims to be a world leader in aquaculture, other nations are already far ahead in regulating salmon farming to protect their environment and wildlife. When did we decide that corporate profits were worth more than our environment—our wild rivers and sea bed—and our future?

Let me be clear that there is still time to turn this round. However, to do that, we must be bold enough to change course, and that starts with one decisive action—pausing the expansion of salmon farms until we fix the serious problems in the industry. Other countries have raised their standards, and Scotland must do the same.

We have a choice—to let destruction continue unchecked or to stand up and protect what is precious. I believe that we can choose a different and better future, but that choice must start now.

The Presiding Officer: We move to the open debate.

15:44

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP): In my view, salmon farming is one of the greatest success stories in modern Scotland, yet I believe that it is the most undervalued. Furthermore, I am not aware of any other industry that is the subject of more politically motivated, unjust and ill-informed attacks than our aquaculture sector. I was pleased to hear the cabinet secretary defending the industry against some of the arguments that are so frequently made.

My patch, Inverness, has the headquarters of Gael Force Marine, which was founded 40 years ago by the then young Stewart Graham and which is now operating internationally with great success and to high standards. The industry has invested massively and arguably more than any other industry in Scotland—£1,000 million. Salmon Scotland's briefing says that it provided evidence to the committee that the investment has resulted in a significant improvement in fish survival, as well as record low levels of sea lice. Recently published Government statistics reiterate that, but Salmon Scotland says that, sadly, the committee's report

“did not cite this evidence that was provided by the sector and Scottish Government regulators.”

I have discussed some of the issues and achievements with industry leaders whom I know quite well from my time as cabinet secretary. I think that they need to blow their trumpet a little more loudly and frequently, because the industry has taken action to cut mortalities and successfully tackle sea lice, and, as the cabinet secretary rightly indicated, there have been matters entirely out of the industry's control that have led to great problems. The industry has not ignored those; it has tackled them.

Finlay Carson: Does the member acknowledge that the committee's report absolutely appreciated the reduction in mortality due to sea lice and the efforts that the industry had made on that? It lies at the door of the Scottish Government to drive collaboration between all bodies to ensure that they can be more fleet of foot in addressing future issues.

Fergus Ewing: I will come to that. In principle, we all want to work well together. I hope that that is a high-level answer.

The industry has done enormous things, including investing in modern hatcheries. I was privileged to open Mowi's hatchery in Invergarry. Modern hatcheries will advance fish health, because young salmon spend more time there and less time at sea, which is a good thing. Those fish will be out more in open sea waters, where there are fewer fish. Those are all good things—should we not recognise that? We do in every other industry, so why is the salmon industry singled out for such rampant abuse?

In a debate in the chamber on Tuesday, Ariane Burgess said that, in the Highlands and Islands,

"only 253 full-time roles have been created over the past 35 years".—[*Official Report*, 18 March 2025; c 30.]

That is utter nonsense. I received a briefing yesterday indicating that, in the north-west Highlands, there are 1,000 direct jobs, and there are 470 in Shetland and 180 in Orkney. Bakkafrøst has 60 sites and employs more than 500 people, and I believe that more than 1,600 people are employed by Mowi. Overall, the industry employs 12,500 people, and, for every person who is directly employed by a salmon farm, there are eight others employed in the supply chain. I hope that the Green Party will recognise that it is—I will be careful about the words that I use, Presiding Officer, as I do not want to transgress any rules, even by accident—peddling matters that are simply untrue. It is talking Scotland down and damaging our most remote communities.

I agree with every word of Beatrice Wishart's brilliant speech in the debate on Tuesday. During my time as cabinet secretary, my visits to Shetland reinforced the huge importance of fish farming and of carrying on the seafaring and fishing traditions

of the great people of the isles of Shetland. I think that it is time for a bit of truth about the value of the salmon industry.

Critics also argue that the industry attracts foreign investment, as if that is wrong. Well, hang on a second. I am talking not about Mr Mountain, but about non-governmental organisations and the Green Party. Was it not Mr Trump who said that foreign investment is bad? Why are the NGOs and the Greens adopting the language of the current President of the United States? That is absurd. Scotland is an open economy. We rely on investment in all our sectors, and we routinely praise our performance—second only to London—on inward investment. Why not in salmon farming?

This is the critical point. I have been to these islands, I have visited these communities, I have been in the cabinet secretary's job and I know that, without this industry being encouraged to achieve its great potential, as it should do with the implementation of the Griggs report, to which I alluded, and with the Scottish Environment Protection Agency—and perhaps the marine directorate, too, in some cases—acting as a blockage, we cannot achieve what we need to achieve. And if we do not do that, the depopulation problem in the Highlands and Islands, which is already acute, will become fatal.

If the Greens had their way, there would be no communities left in large swathes of the Highlands and Islands. They should go back to the wine bars, prepare for the revolution over the Chablis and let the salmon farming industry continue to contribute greatly to the commonweal and the wealth of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland.

15:51

Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I am grateful to all the contributors and to be part of this important debate on salmon farming in Scotland. In fairness, much of the work went into the report before I joined the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee late last year, so I thank all those who have served on the committee for their work and the many who gave evidence.

In reply to Fergus Ewing, I want to be clear from the outset that the Scottish Conservatives understand the economic importance of Scotland's salmon farming sector. We want to support the sector where possible. Mr Ewing is absolutely right. More than 2,500 people are directly employed by the sector, which had an historic high last year of £844 million in exports. There is no doubt that the sector is a success story for Scotland, but—it is not much of a but, but it is a wee bit of a but—the Scottish Conservatives also want the highest standards of fish welfare. That is important not just for ethical reasons; it is also vital

to maintain the high standard of the salmon products that we produce and, as a result, protect the globally recognised provenance of Scottish salmon.

What I do not want to happen is the negative stories that would ultimately come out if mortality or diseases continue to increase, which would put down an industry that is so vital to Scotland. Fergus Ewing is absolutely right about putting down the industry. We must protect it, but we must also ensure that it is there for the next 10, 20, 30, 40 or 50 years.

Finlay Carson: Does Tim Eagle recognise that, in many parts of the industry in Scotland, we are already seeing performance that is above the regulatory baseline and reaching world standards when it comes to welfare and reduction in chemicals? The Government, by increasing the bar, might increase confidence in the industry and show it to be one of the world leaders.

Tim Eagle: I completely agree, and I am coming on to that. I am not for massive regulation; I am for small state. However, there is a role for the Government in ensuring that the industry is sustainable for the future.

It is too large a report to touch on everything, and I do not have time to do so, but I want to touch quickly on a few key parts. Mortality is a very serious issue. Mandatory mortality reporting to the fish health inspectorate is a positive, so that we can all ensure that significant events do not occur and that, when they do, everything is done to work out why. The Government has said that it will look at issues around persistent high mortality and consider regulatory powers to limit or halt production at sites with high mortality rates. That is welcome, and I look forward to seeing that progress.

A number of serious concerns have been raised around welfare. I welcome a new assessment of options, which will be completed prior to the September update to committee. As my colleague Edward Mountain mentioned, it is vital in any farm system that robust health and welfare standards are in place, which includes good monitoring and ensure long-term sustainability and ethical management practices.

The use of wrasse was an important discussion for the committee. Wrasse plays an important role in natural habitats, helping to maintain the balance of marine ecosystems. For that reason, they are widely used in aquaculture as an alternative method of controlling sea lice to chemicals. The committee heard evidence that almost a third of cleaner fish die within a few weeks of being deployed in marine pens. More worrying than that for the committee is the great concern about the impact that the catching of wild wrasse is having

on other fish stocks and the health of our marine ecosystems.

The Scottish Government recognised that, in the light of evidence in the University of Glasgow's report on wrasse, an assessment of the fishery should take place before the opening of the season in May 2025. I am not sure whether the cabinet secretary is due to speak again in the debate, but, if so, it would be great to hear more about that assessment in her closing remarks. If she will not speak again today, perhaps she could write to the committee on that point.

It is disappointing to see that the Government does not support the collection of data that would include wrasse mortality. I recognise that the industry is producing a lot of data, but it would have been good to know about levels of wrasse mortality. Such data would have given us useful insight into how efficiently or otherwise the sector currently uses wrasse.

It is absolutely vital that we remember the massive importance of wild salmon to our natural environment. In 2023, we saw the lowest wild salmon catch since records began, with a 25 per cent reduction compared with the figure for 2022. I come from an area with rivers that once teemed with fish. It is devastating to see our rivers now nearly empty. I do not blame the farmed salmon industry, but, like all of us, it has a role to play. It must ensure that wild salmon genes are not mixed with those of farmed salmon through escapes and that, where they might cross paths, habitats are healthy. The committee stopped short of calling for a pause or moratorium on new site expansion, but, as the cabinet secretary mentioned, it is no secret that various groups and individuals have called for that.

The most important point that I want to press is that, for the protection of our wild fish stocks, our communities and the farmed salmon industry, it is absolutely vital that the committee's recommendations, along with the measures in the cabinet secretary's response, are implemented. It might be that we need to put more regulation in place, or that sites need to move further offshore. Some areas might no longer be suitable. However, it is only through discussion and action that we will have the sustainable and thriving salmon farming sector that Fergus Ewing described, for all who are involved.

15:56

Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): Salmon has become synonymous with Scotland, at home and the world over, whether it be through idyllic scenes of fly fishing for wild salmon on our rivers or from enticing restaurant menus that feature farmed salmon as

part of our world-famous food and drink offer. During the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee's follow-up inquiry, it was important that we kept sight of the significant value of our salmon to our economy and our communities. However, it was also imperative that we took a hard look at where improvements needed to be made, to protect not only the welfare of our fish and our planet but the reputation and longevity of our industry.

I will focus on three areas that are important to me: wrasse and lumpfish cleaner fish, the need for species-specific legal welfare standards for farmed fish and for wild-caught fish that the industry uses as tools in such settings, and the interaction of farmed and wild salmon.

The committee's report makes several recommendations on wild wrasse fishery, which is closely associated with the salmon aquaculture sector. I fully support the recommendations on data, transparency and a fisheries management plan. Our wrasse fishery is lightly regulated, but those regulations require a closed season between 1 December and 30 April each year. The marine directorate has said that the closed season should align with the spawning season, which is best practice for sensitive fisheries such as wrasse. However, in response to a freedom of information request, the directorate has also pointed to a detailed paper on the subject, which was produced in 2017 by the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science, or CFAS, which sits within the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. Entitled "Northern European Wrasse—Summary of commercial use, fisheries and implications for management", it shows that the Scottish wrasse fishery is almost precisely open when it should be closed and closed when it should be open.

Salmon aquaculture uses five wrasse species, three of which—corkwing, rock cook and cuckoo wrasse, which are easy for me to say—spawn exclusively during the open season. The Scottish fishery also opens for four of the five months when the two other species—goldsinny and ballan wrasse—spawn. However, that is not the case in English waters. For example, in response to that report, the Devon & Severn Inshore Fisheries Conservation Authority closed its wrasse fishery between April and mid-July to ensure maximum protection.

There are real risks here. Not only are wrasse economically important to the salmon industry, but, as we have heard, they protect crucial habitats for spawning species, both commercial and non-commercial. There will be economic and ecological consequences if wrasse stocks should crash, so I therefore hope that the minister can confirm that future management of the fishery will

respect the closed season indicated by the 2017 CFAS paper.

I encourage the Scottish Government to fully consider the committee report's recommendations to bring forward additional regulation and official guidance under the Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act 2006 in order to set specific baseline standards for the welfare of farmed fish. Although I appreciate that there is an industry code of practice and an RSPCA Assured scheme that producers can sign up to, farmers raising terrestrial animals must comply with species-specific requirements under law, and additional detailed guidance is published for most species that describes how farmers can not only meet their legal responsibilities but go beyond that minimum to achieve higher welfare.

Farmed fish are offered no such legal protection beyond not having to suffer unnecessarily. I know that there has been significant investment by the industry to grapple with persistent welfare issues of farmed salmon and cleaner fish, but I believe that it is imperative and morally just that those animals are protected in the same way that we protect those that reside on the land.

As someone who resides right beside a river that was once full of wild salmon—Tim Eagle said the same thing—I urge the Government to publish an updated timetable for the implementation of the agreed recommendations from the salmon interactions working group. When asked about the interactions between farmed and wild salmon and the delays in implementing the working group's recommendation, the cabinet secretary told the committee that she recognises the

"criticism that the progress is not fast enough".—[*Official Report, Rural Affairs and Islands Committee*, 13 November 2024; c 44.]

Stakeholders such as Open Seas have also stated that the open-net pens used in the marine stage of salmon farming can lead to impacts on the marine environment, with sensitive habitats and species being of particular concern. Open-net pens allow the free exchange of water but also allow discharges from the pens, including waste, chemical treatment and sea lice, and can lead to escaped salmon interacting with our wild and endangered salmon species. We should remember that wild salmon is a red endangered species. We do not want to lose that iconic species, which draws many tourists from around the world.

Closed-pen technology could directly address those concerns by minimising environmental impact and protecting Scotland's wider marine ecosystems, fisheries and tourism industry. I ask the Government, as other colleagues have asked, to urgently work with the industry to innovate in that area. Companies are ready to start deploying

such technology. Given our rapidly warming waters, which we have heard about, it is crucial. Industry can do as much as it can with the technology that it has today, but that does not address the fact that our waters are getting warmer, and industry will have to contend with that. Closed-pen technology could help in that respect.

16:02

Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I genuinely enjoyed taking part in the inquiry; it felt like proper scrutiny work. There were really tricky bits of contradictory evidence, and we were asking questions that we did not know the answers to. I changed my mind a few times throughout the process, going back and forth with colleagues from different parties. I say a huge thank you to my committee colleagues, the clerks, SPICe and everyone who came forward with evidence for us.

I move on to the less positive bit. I am a huge fan of Scottish salmon—it is delicious, and I love it with scrambled eggs, but I have questioned a lot during the inquiry how much damage my enjoyment of salmon has done. I do not want that to be the case. I want Scotland to be proud of the industry and the product; I want to have confidence in the product and to be able to tell others that it is an ethical purchase.

When we look at the issues, the mortality rates of farmed salmon are of great concern to me. It is particularly frustrating that many different types of death do not have to be reported. The Coastal Communities Network highlighted in evidence that the current fish health inspectorate data

“exclude all deaths below quite high weekly thresholds of 1.5% or 1% of salmon in each farm (depending on their weight) as well as any smolts that die in their first six weeks at sea”,

as so many die when they are first put in salt water. It also said:

“These figures exclude mortality in the earlier freshwater stage, during which more than 30% of fish often die, before the survivors are put to sea.”

Thanks to that, I could not say with confidence that at any stage in the inquiry I had a full understanding of the true scale of deaths in the salmon farming industry.

It is all very well to point to the quantity of available data, but I am far more concerned about the quality of the data, because I was frustrated by it. Many people who gave evidence were also frustrated by it, and it is a complaint of many constituents who have reached out because they have been unable to pin down the true impact of nearby farms.

We discussed in detail the fact that many drivers of salmon mortality are not within farmers' control. They cannot reasonably predict or prevent climate change, extreme weather, jellyfish or algal blooms, but that does not change the number of dead fish on the farms.

The stark difference in average mortality between Shetland farms and Argyll farms and the difference in risk of interactions with wild salmon between those areas suggest that some places are more suited to hosting salmon farms. I hope that progress on marine planning in the future might give greater clarity to the industry and affected communities.

Edward Mountain: I apologise that I cannot remember its number, but one recommendation in the REC Committee report was that salmon farms should move further offshore so that there is greater churn in the sea and a chance to keep temperatures lower, so that the farm is less likely to attract some of the pests and jellyfish that are attracted inshore. That does not seem to have happened. Would that be a useful way to reduce mortality on salmon farms?

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): I can give Emma Roddick the time back.

Emma Roddick: I think that there is disagreement on the question of being offshore or onshore and on the distance that is most suitable for salmon farms but, overall, more thought needs to be put into how we use marine areas. It is clear that some places are already warmer than others. Given climate change, we should be thinking about the best place to have salmon farms.

On welfare standards for salmon, despite people on both sides of the debate being pressed, it was very difficult to come to conclusions about what a happy fish looks and acts like. Before visiting the farms, I spoke to animal welfare campaigners and asked them what to look out for, but it was not really possible for visiting MSPs to know, from just standing at the side of the pen, what the fish's experience was. I enjoyed feeding the salmon and watching them leap, but I could not tell members what their welfare standard was.

Pinned up on the wall in the barge on the Dunstaffnage farm was a copy of the welfare standards for farmed animals. Those who are familiar will know that many of those standards are not relevant to fish, and it was painfully clear that there is no consensus on fish welfare. Professor Lynne Sneddon's evidence on the pain and distress of salmon that are subjected to various lice treatments in particular was very helpful. I highlight her comments to the Scottish Government as a great place to start if we are looking to create welfare standards, which I

sincerely believe that we should. I look forward to further information on that in the next year.

My understanding of the treatment of cleaner fish on salmon farms suggests an even graver situation, and data and welfare standards for those fish are desperately needed. Concerns were raised about the impact of salmon farming on wild wrasse populations, which is also deeply worrying.

It is never easy to go against the grain, and I felt a lot of pressure to just say, "Let them get on with it," because the industry brings in money and jobs and there is a view that we must let it keep on growing without question. However, we do not have to do that, and the industry should be as sustainable as it is possible for it to be.

As the inquiry went on, I felt more and more strongly that there was justification for a pause in expansion until issues around mortality, welfare and the use of cleaner fish and other lice treatments were sorted out. By the end, I felt that doing any less would be irresponsible, both for the animals that we are discussing and for the industry itself. That is why, after debating every detail of the recommendations running up to it, I could not put my name to the final section of the report, which stated that the committee did not feel that a moratorium was justified. I hope that I am wrong, and I hope that I will come back with the committee next year astounded by the positive progress that has been made. I will be happy to have a red face, and I will approach any new evidence next year with an open mind.

I agree with Edward Mountain on the Salmon Scotland letter that responded to the inquiry. The tone was one of indignation and even offence at being scrutinised at all. That really highlighted that this is not an industry that will change practices unless it is forced to.

I hope that colleagues can hear that I have given this a lot of thought, and I appreciate that there is great disagreement on many of the points that I have outlined. With hand on heart, I can say that I feel that there needs to be more urgency from the Government, regulators and industry to get things up to scratch.

I want to get behind Scottish food and drink, and I do not want to have hesitations. There are strong recommendations in the committee's report, and I hope that they serve as a catalyst for progress and that another committee does not meet in another five years, confused about how few have been heeded.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to closing speeches.

16:09

Ariane Burgess: Imagine a future where people look back and say, "They made the right choice. They protected Scotland's seas, wildlife and coastal communities." That future is still within our reach, but only if we act now.

The expansion of Scotland's salmon farming industry must be paused. I reiterate that this is not about ending salmon farming; it is about pressing pause in order to tighten regulations for existing farms, safeguard the environment and preserve the international reputation of our farmed salmon. Right now, intensive salmon farming is damaging our marine ecosystems. Pollution, sea bed degradation and unchecked sea lice infestations are destroying biodiversity. If we allow the expansion to continue, the damage may become irreversible.

Scotland's wild salmon populations are already in crisis. Their future is in the balance. Sea lice spread from farms to wild fish and weaken them, which is why we called for no more farms to be placed on migratory routes. Without urgent action, we could lose this iconic species from our rivers for ever.

From our inquiry, it is clear that the industry has failed to meet environmental and welfare benchmarks. Voluntary improvements are inadequate and have been far too slow. Existing regulations are toothless. A pause would be our chance to implement stronger, enforceable protections and species-specific guidance that brings us in line with what other nations did long ago.

Finlay Carson: Will the member give us an example of where the Scottish salmon industry has failed to abide by the environmental legislation that is in place?

Ariane Burgess: Let me be clear about environmental standards. We have a duty to apply the precautionary principle, which demands action in the face of uncertainty to prevent potential catastrophic harm. Despite overwhelming evidence of environmental damage, the Government continues to allow expansion, and that is reckless. The Government says that the precautionary principle can be applied flexibly, which is wrong.

The numbers tell the story. The proportion of fish that die in salmon farms has more than tripled in the past decade. Compared with previous rates of 7 per cent, the most recent figures are not a cause for celebration. At some sites, the rate is catastrophic. More than 86 per cent of salmon at one farm died in the previous cycle and the figure was 82 per cent at another farm, with no consequences or action being taken afterwards. The Government's response is to say that

“analytical work is required to understand ... sites with ‘persistent high mortality’ ”.

Why has that work not been done? That level of mortality would never be tolerated in any other farming sector, so why are we tolerating it in our salmon farms and our seas?

Some claim that a pause would hurt jobs, but let us look at the reality—I hope that Fergus Ewing is paying attention. According to fish farm production survey data from 1990 to 2023, salmon farming has directly created just 253 new full-time jobs in the Highlands and Islands since 1990. Meanwhile, the environmental damage that it causes takes jobs in marine tourism and wild fisheries away from our communities.

A temporary pause would be a measured and responsible step. It would give us the breathing room to put in place effective environmental and welfare standards. It would allow existing farms to catch up with the higher standards of newer farms. It would ensure that Scotland’s natural resources are protected for future generations.

Let us be honest that the Government has been far too slow. Of the 65 recommendations that the REC Committee made, only a fraction have been implemented. We have called for action on those recommendations and more, and yet the Government still asks for more time. It evades responsibility and asks us to trust the industry to act in the best interests of our salmon and our seas. However, we have seen the millions of dead fish, the environmental harm and, most recently, the industry’s appeals against sea lice limits—none of which gives us confidence or trust.

The Government says that it is protecting wild salmon but it refuses to penalise the industry in relation to sea lice numbers or escapes or to stop new farms on migratory routes. We cannot allow this destruction to continue. If we care about the future of Scotland’s seas and if we want to protect our coastal communities and to preserve our natural heritage, we must act now. That is why I am calling on the Government to introduce an immediate pause on fish farm expansion. A pause sends the message to the industry, our export partners and the people of Scotland that we will not sacrifice our seas for corporate profits. Future generations will judge us on what we do now. Will we be remembered as the ones who ignored the warnings or as the ones who took action? This is our moment. Let us make the right choice.

16:15

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): In the previous session of the Parliament, I was a member of the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee, which carried out the inquiry on the salmon farming industry nearly seven years ago. It

was one of two thorough reports at the time: the other was from the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee the year before. I welcome the work of the current Rural Affairs and Islands Committee in following up the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee’s report, and I thank the committee members for that work.

However, from reading the findings, I can see that it is a case of déjà vu in far too many areas. As a member of the REC Committee in 2018, I was one of the two members whom Edward Mountain referred to who dissented from the committee’s conclusion to completely reject a moratorium. The committee report recorded my view that

“a moratorium should be considered if sufficient progress is not made to address regulatory deficiencies and fish health and environmental concerns.”

I took that view at the time, not because I was arguing for an immediate moratorium, but because I had no faith that the Government or the industry would properly address the regulatory and welfare failures that our committee had highlighted, or that they would, at the very least, not do so unless a moratorium was a serious option that could be considered. It gives me no pleasure to say that, seven years on, that now seems to be the view of the majority of members on the successor committee.

The committee is right to condemn the slow progress on improving the environmental impact and the governance of the sector, and it is right to highlight the fact that, seven years on, dozens of the REC Committee’s recommendations have still not been implemented.

In its submission, animal welfare charity OneKind said that

“there has not been meaningful or urgent action and the status quo is still very much evident in terms of animal health and welfare.”

Salmon deaths have reached the tens of millions over recent years. As the committee report highlights, the coastal communities network referred to information from biomass data, published by SEPA, that estimates that 17.5 million fish died in 2022—a level that Professor Simon MacKenzie from the University of Stirling told the committee was not “a sustainable practice.” In one of its written submissions, Animal Equality UK pointed out that

“17 million on-farm mortalities is the tip of the iceberg”,

and that the true scale of deaths in Scotland’s salmon farms is masked as a result of underreporting.

Last year saw record freshwater deaths and, although 2024 saw a welcome improvement, mortality is still more than twice the 2018 level.

The slow rate of progress in tackling mortality rates is not good enough, but what is more concerning is the Scottish Government's response to the committee's report and recommendations, which fails to acknowledge that.

There are some positive aspects of the Government's response, such as its commitment to considering putting basic baseline standards for the welfare of farmed fish on a statutory footing, which is something that OneKind suggested in its submission to the committee.

Edward Mountain: Is the member as shocked as I was to see that, by its own admission, at the rate at which it is progressing, it would take the industry 19 years to get back to 2017 mortality levels? Does the member think that that is acceptable?

Colin Smyth: I certainly do not, and my concern is that we might not even get back to those levels, given some of the issues that I will come to talk about in a second. I fear that the Government fails to acknowledge the scale or the gravity of the serious challenges that the industry faces and their welfare consequences.

Where the Government does not openly reject the committee's recommendations, which it does in many cases, its responses are vague and non-committal. There is no commitment to provide the fish health inspectorate or another appropriate body with the powers to limit or halt production at sites that have persistently high mortality rates. There is no commitment to introduce stricter conditions for accepted reasons on no counts.

There is no commitment to end siting of farms in the close vicinity of known migratory routes for wild salmon or for mandatory reporting of mortalities to the fish health inspectorate, even though that data is collected—a point that Finlay Carson highlighted in his contribution.

Mairi Gougeon: The member has just said that the information is already collected. What is the point of regulation, then, given that all regulation should be proportionate and balanced in relation to the impact that it can have on the industry? As I said to Finlay Carson, I would not hesitate to introduce regulations if there was a problem in collecting that data.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I will give you the time back, Mr Smyth.

Colin Smyth: Thank you very much.

Let me turn that question around. Why is the Government against consistent mandatory reporting of mortalities and publication of that information? I am not clear why the Government is against that and has rejected making that commitment so openly.

There was also no commitment to publishing an annual fish health report detailing the health and welfare status of all farmed aquatic finfish. Those are reasonable recommendations that have been, in my view, unreasonably rejected.

I recognise points that have been made in the debate that the reasons for the high mortality rate have changed—they are less about sea lice, in relation to which we have seen welcome improvements, and more about climate change. The committee concluded that tackling such causes is

“not currently within the operational capability of industry”.

When she intervened on Edward Mountain earlier, the cabinet secretary almost suggested that, because many such things are outwith the direct control of the industry—which has no plan to deal with them—we should tolerate high mortality rates. I simply do not accept that. Rhoda Grant was absolutely right to express concern about the lack of Government support for research and development on such issues to see whether we can find solutions to them.

I recognise the points that have been made in the debate about the economic and social benefit that the salmon farming industry brings to rural and island communities. The year-round stable and direct employment that it brings to communities, often on good wages—higher than in other employment, given the appallingly low levels of pay that still plague rural Scotland—is important to those areas. Those jobs help to keep people in the community and to keep rural schools, shops and community halls open—although the dependency on those jobs maybe says a lot about the lack of alternatives and the fragility of those rural communities.

I also recognise that many indirect jobs are created through supply chains across Scotland. Indeed, I visited AquaGen in Dumfries, which is world leading in the production of genetic starter material for the sector and has created some high-skilled jobs in my area.

However, the real threat to jobs and the salmon industry is not the demand for more action to address the welfare, environmental and regulatory failures of the sector, which the committee report highlighted, but the reputational damage that will be caused by failing to act. As Rhoda Grant said, it is only with good governance that we protect our international reputation. Business as usual is simply not an option.

The future of the sector—sustaining the jobs that it creates—requires that we hold the industry to the highest environmental standards, that we ensure that the sector takes animal welfare in aquaculture more seriously, and that we demand that the Government put in place the regulatory

framework to achieve that, rather than it simply shrugging its shoulders about mortality rates. The changes that the committee's report calls for are not about placing unreasonable burdens on the sector, but are about supporting the industry to make necessary improvements.

Not every person who raises genuine concerns about the status quo is simply anti-salmon or anti-industry—many are pro-animal welfare, pro-environment and pro-communities, and want meaningful action to secure the long-term viability of the salmon farming industry.

I want nothing more than to see the committee conclude in 12 months that adequate progress has been made in addressing those concerns, but we will not get that if the Government stands in the way of enabling the sector to grow sustainably, and in a way that takes welfare far more seriously.

16:24

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I thank the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee for all its work on the follow-up inquiry, and its clerks for putting together this latest report on Scotland's salmon farming industry. I also thank all the organisations that provided briefings and insight for this afternoon's debate.

Salmon farming takes place across the region that I represent. As others, including Fergus Ewing, have said, it is an important industry for the Highlands and Islands. One is never far from a salmon farm in the waters of Scapa Flow, which my home in Orkney overlooks and is home to a number of farms.

As other members have highlighted, the industry makes a considerable contribution to Scotland's economy and an important contribution to many local economies, where other employment and opportunities can be limited.

However, as we have heard today, the industry and Government face a number of challenges, which they must overcome. They include the significant natural and environmental challenges that members across the chamber have rightly highlighted. We have heard that progress has been made on some issues, but I suggest that the majority opinion, and certainly the opinion of the committee, is that—to quote the convener of the committee, Finlay Carson—

“in most areas, the sector still has a way to go in realising the ambitions”

that that report set out, and that

“It is evident that changes to regulation and enforcement of the industry have not been taken forward with the urgency that was called for in 2018.”

Mortality rates continue to be one of the stand-out concerns for many members, as does the impact of farms on the natural environment and on wild salmon numbers. The Scottish Government has many questions to answer, including about why it has failed to implement the previous recommendations, which would have led to real improvements in the industry.

What is clear from a number of contributions today is that this cannot be another report that Scottish National Party ministers profess to welcome, then file away and fail to act on. The Scottish Government must listen to the new recommendations from the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee and take them forward with an urgency that it has, so far, failed to show.

The RAI Committee convener, Finlay Carson, highlighted the committee's calls for Scottish ministers to ensure that regulators are given new powers to limit or halt production at sites where there are persistently high mortality rates, and for ministers to work with the industry to set the criteria for those restrictions. He also highlighted concerns over the interaction between farmed and wild salmon, as did Tim Eagle.

Tim Eagle also highlighted the impact on wild salmon and the worrying reductions in wild salmon catches in Scotland's rivers. That is a real concern, given the importance of salmon fishing to so many communities across Scotland, including many that are served by the great salmon rivers of the Highlands.

Tim Eagle also highlighted the role of wrasse as a cleaner fish, as others did, and the mortality rates of captured wrasse. He raised concerns about the impact of fishing on wild stocks, the lack of assessment of wild stocks before now—while recognising that such assessment will now happen—and the lack of data on mortality. Lack of data is clearly an issue that seems to have concerned a number of members today.

Edward Mountain, who was involved in the original inquiry in 2018, was right. If the Government is, as he has said, a true friend of the sector, it will want the industry to do well—as we all do—and will recognise the value of the jobs and the contribution that the sector makes to the economy. Pretending that nothing is wrong is not the way forward. He said, as others have, that mortality rates are still too high and that the action that is needed has not been taken. He also called for openness, transparency and improvement, and he warned that

“the industry is in the last-chance saloon”

in respect of the need to deliver on the recommendations of the RAI Committee.

I will turn to some other contributions. Cabinet secretary Mairi Gougeon asserted that the Scottish Government has taken the report and the recommendations seriously, but we are here today because of failures to act in full on the previous report—the proof of the pudding will, very much, be in the eating, regarding whether the latest report goes the same way.

Rhoda Grant talked about the closure of two sites in Skye, which is in the region that we both represent, due to planning decisions. I am afraid that planning decisions and the slowness of getting them through is a challenge that is faced by a number of businesses, particularly in our Highlands and Islands region.

Ariane Burgess called for a pause, but in the answer that she gave him, she was unable to provide any evidence to Finlay Carson on how the Greens actually came to that position.

Colin Smyth: That is a fair point. Back in 2018, when we had the debate on the moratorium, the implications of it were discussed. However, given that we once again have a parliamentary committee coming to the conclusion that a moratorium should be considered if progress is not made, surely the implications of that option should be looked at by that committee or others.

Does Jamie Halcro Johnston believe that a piece of work to look at the full implications of a moratorium should be done, or will we just keep coming back to the moratorium discussion without fully going through those implications?

Jamie Halcro Johnston: I thank the member for that intervention and welcome the question, but I will say that I am not a member or substitute member of the committee, and that the issue that he raises is for the committee to decide. I think that the report makes clear the committee's position on that issue.

As always, Fergus Ewing gave a—

Edward Mountain: Rumbustious.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: Edward Mountain is heckling me with “rumbustious”, but I think that we should say “impassioned”, as Mr Ewing gave an impassioned defence of an industry that we all absolutely value, and spoke of its contribution to Scotland's economy and the investment that the sector has made over the past few years in seeking the improvements that have been mentioned.

I was delighted to hear talk of wine bar revolutionaries again, although I am sure that Ariane Burgess was less so. Mr Ewing made a serious point about the importance of the sector and the risk of depopulation. In those communities there are often not a lot of opportunities, and the

industry can provide well-paid jobs that it is important that we support.

This has been an important debate about an important report. As I said, it has been a passionate debate at times, and I think that the inquiry has also been impassioned, on occasion, although it has also featured a number of measured and knowledgeable contributions. However, the report will mean nothing if the Scottish Government does not act on it.

We all—well, nearly all of us—recognise the importance of the salmon farming industry. We recognise the money that it brings in and the jobs and livelihoods that it supports in our communities. However, in protecting all that, we need to ensure that it is conducted using the highest possible standards, and that there is a focus on honesty, openness and transparency.

We cannot afford the successor committee in the next session of the Parliament to find itself in the same position as this session's Rural Affairs and Islands Committee, and having to launch an inquiry into the Scottish Government's failure to implement its predecessor committee's recommendations.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call the cabinet secretary. You have a fairly generous seven minutes.

16:31

Mairi Gougeon: I have been taking copious notes throughout the debate because of the number of issues that have been raised, and I will try to work through them as effectively as I can.

First, I reiterate my thanks to the committee for its work and to all the organisations and stakeholders who gave their time and evidence to support that process and the debate this afternoon.

As I said earlier, the salmon farming sector attracts many and varied stakeholder opinions. Although the sector is rightly scrutinised and held to account, it is important that that scrutiny leads to the kind of open and respectful dialogue that is rooted in clear evidence.

In our response to the committee's report, we have committed to a number of actions that will, I hope, build the necessary transparency and accessibility of data and will also examine more closely some of the assumptions that have been made about the sector.

It is quite clear from the debate that the value of aquaculture is recognised—that has been widely acknowledged by MSPs across the chamber. We all value the really important role that it plays in supporting employment. As I mentioned in my

opening remarks, it supports 2,300 direct jobs and there are more than 10,000 roles more broadly in the supply chain, many of which are skilled and provide average annual incomes that are well above national and regional averages. We also value the £324 million in gross value added by the salmon sector to the Scottish economy and the £1.1 billion that the sector was worth at the farm gate—those are the figures from 2023. That is why the Government continues to support the sustainable development of salmon farming in Scotland. Our response to the committee's report, alongside our "Vision for Sustainable Aquaculture", sets out how we will support the development of the sector to continue to operate within environmental limits and deliver social and economic benefits for Scotland.

I turn to some of the key points that were raised during the debate. I understand the issues around the delivery of the recommendations and the criticisms that I have heard across the chamber in relation to that. We are committed to working with the sector and other stakeholders to realise improvements in performance as rapidly as is practically possible, but we are mindful of the complexity of the issues that are under discussion and, of course, of the resources that are available to us to do that. We have set out in our response to the committee where we will take action within the next 12 months and where we expect to deliver other key strands of work as we prioritise those key actions.

I have to take issue with some of the claims that we have not made progress since the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee's initial report. I expect to be held to account in the chamber, but I would say that significant progress has been made. I do not think that there has been much cognisance of the amount of work that has gone into addressing some of the key challenges that were identified in the initial reports. On the issues around sea lice that were addressed in the reports at that time, I note that sea lice levels are now the lowest that they have ever been. We have seen the recent introduction of the sea lice framework; we have seen SEPA's revised regulatory framework, which has been tightening the benthic standards, and has resulted in enhanced modelling and monitoring; we have had the Griggs review and the associated recommendations; and we have seen the work that is being driven forward by the consenting task group that I mentioned.

Edward Mountain: One of the recommendations of the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee's report was to remove salmon farms away from routes of migratory salmon on the west coast. I can name one fish farm that has moved. Apart from the one at Loch Maree, can you name any more?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Speak through the chair, please.

Mairi Gougeon: That is something that I would have to look at. The overall point that the member raises is important, and it was an important recommendation in the initial reports.

I think that it is fair to say that some fish farms are in areas that they would not want to be in, and they would look to move. That is why the work of the consenting task group that I mentioned is important. It is about streamlining the consenting process. I hope that the next stages of that work will also look at that issue. If a fish farm were to move, it would still have to go through the same regulatory processes as it does right now. I think that that is appropriate. The work that we are driving forward will be critical in that area.

I know that members would like to see action on everything everywhere all at once, but those are not small items simply to tick off. They are significant pieces of work that require collaboration, the building of relationships that I touched on earlier, resources and time. I have tried to be as transparent and clear as possible about realistic timescales for the work. I have offered to give an update to the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee in six months so that progress can be tracked against what we set out to do. However, there must be recognition of the significance of the work that is being done and that is still to be done.

The issues around our changing climate were predominantly addressed by Ariane Burgess. I disagree with the member that climate change means that the sector's days are numbered. There are new challenges from the changing climate. The industry continues to invest in trying to address those challenges and adapt to them—as do we and our research institutions. I say that in direct response to the comments that were made by Rhoda Grant and Colin Smyth.

The marine directorate has engaged with the Marine Climate Change Impacts Partnership to improve understanding of the effect of climate change on aquaculture. As I mentioned in an intervention, we are funding the Sustainable Aquaculture Innovation Centre. The centre has done more than 70 projects on a variety of topics, such as gill health and optimising fish nutrition, and it has leveraged overall funding of around £63 million via the farmed fish health framework. There have been studies to identify practical actions to help to address harmful algal blooms. It has standardised mortality recording across salmon farms and done work on medicines and their more effective use.

That brings me back to a point that Edward Mountain made earlier and some of his assertions.

Antibiotic use has dropped by 57 per cent, so I dispute Edward Mountain's assertion that it is on the increase.

Edward Mountain: I appreciate that the cabinet secretary is using the figures that are in front of her. I am using the figures that were produced by the Veterinary Medicines Directorate, as quoted in the House of Commons. Those are the figures and the percentages that it uses. Will the cabinet secretary confirm that she disputes the Veterinary Medicines Directorate's figures that were used in the House of Commons?

Mairi Gougeon: First, I want to make sure that we are not talking at cross-purposes. The initial figures that Edward Mountain used were based on data from 2017 or 2018, I think. I am more than happy to follow up with him to make sure that we are using the appropriate figures.

There is, and will continue to be, much work to do to address the challenges of our changing climate.

Another key point that was touched on was about data transparency. I reiterate that more data is collected and published on salmon farming in Scotland than is published on salmon farming in any other jurisdiction, or on terrestrial farming sectors. I do not believe that it is necessary at this stage to mandate through legislation any further collections of mortality data. However, even though we publish a lot of data, I recognise that it is not necessarily easy for people to navigate. That was clear from the evidence that the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee heard, as were the wider frustrations about it.

I come back to the point that I have made throughout the debate: any regulation that we introduce must be proportionate. If I believed that there were issues in collecting data, I would not hesitate to consider them.

However, I recognise that improvements could be made in how the existing data are presented and explained, so I will explore how that can be improved. We will work with partners to scope out how the Scotland's Aquaculture website can be refreshed. That will include looking at the financing of that. We will progress that work over this year and into next year, but we anticipate that implementation—especially if we look to make changes to the website—might take longer than that. I will keep the committee updated.

Another important topic that a number of members touched on was that of wrasse and cleaner fish more generally. Since the publication of the initial inquiry report in 2018, we have introduced a number of improvements, including mandatory measures to regulate the wrasse fishery. We are continuing to improve the evidence base on and the management of the fishery, and

we have invested in research to continue to inform our decision making in an effort to protect the stocks.

As I informed the committee when I appeared in front of it last November, we are currently undertaking a fisheries assessment, which includes a habitats regulations appraisal and appropriate assessment for the wild wrasse fishery. I will, of course, keep the committee updated on how that work is progressing.

On welfare more broadly, we will undertake an analysis of options—statutory or otherwise—to understand how welfare standards can best be supported.

I can see that my light is flashing, which indicates that the Presiding Officer would like me to draw to a close. I am sorry that I have not been able to address the myriad issues that have been raised during the debate.

I again thank the committee for its work, and I thank members for their contributions to the debate. We have heard a wide range of views. Although I would not agree with every point that has been made on every issue, I am grateful for the consideration that has been given to these important matters. I reassure members that we are listening.

Our response to the committee's report sets out our planned actions. The salmon farming industry is of vital importance to our economy, and it is of particular importance to our rural and island communities. I hope that we can work together to ensure its continued success as a sustainable sector, operating within environmental limits and providing community benefit.

16:42

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): I am pleased to close this afternoon's debate on behalf of the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee, as its deputy convener. I reiterate the committee's thanks to all the stakeholders who engaged with our inquiry. Their views were invaluable to us in drawing up our report's conclusions and recommendations. I also thank members across the chamber for their contributions to what has been, mostly, a constructive and thoughtful discussion about an industry that I am sure we all want to succeed in becoming more sustainable.

Members such as Rhoda Grant, Fergus Ewing, Tim Eagle, Jamie Halcro Johnston and Colin Smyth rightly spoke about the economic and social benefits that salmon farming brings to their communities. They made the important point that, as well as being directly responsible for supporting jobs in its sector, the industry is indirectly responsible, through the wider supply chain, for

supporting jobs in areas such as transportation, engineering and food processing.

I have first-hand knowledge of how important salmon farming is in my constituency of Shetland. In fact, figures that Shetland Islands Council provided to the committee suggested that local aquaculture provides around 400 full-time jobs and accounts for around 12 per cent of our islands' total GVA. The committee heard about the local initiatives that fish farmers support through their community benefit funds and the funding that is made available to local authorities, through sea bed leases, from salmon farm development.

However, at our community engagement event in Oban, the committee also heard that, for some, the benefit of that funding is not always clearly visible to the general public. That is why we recommended that the Scottish Government should develop good practice principles for community benefits from aquaculture developments. We think that that would help to provide greater transparency on community benefit packages and would help to ensure that they are tailored to the characteristics of each development and to their local communities.

The cabinet secretary said that the Scottish Government would explore our proposal on good practice principles with stakeholders to ensure that any decision is in place ahead of the 2026 Crown Estate Scotland lease fee increases. The committee will be keen to see how that work progresses over the coming year.

Many members spoke about the challenges that the sector is currently grappling with, including those relating to fish mortality. The committee was disappointed not to see more progress on that issue since the REC Committee report. I welcome the news of a reduction in the overall mortality rate last year and hope that that progress will continue, but that will happen only if the Scottish Government provides the support that the sector needs to adapt and innovate so that it can address some of the environmental and climate-related factors that many members touched on in their contributions.

Members spoke about the need for better regulation and enforcement of the industry to help improve performance. The committee highlighted mortality as one area where the Scottish Government must address gaps in accountability and governance. The committee was also concerned about the structure of the wider regulatory framework, which does not seem to take full account of how salmon farming impacts wild salmon. That lack of a holistic approach to regulation was consistently emphasised by stakeholders such as Fisheries Management Scotland in their evidence to the committee.

Members also discussed the need for more consistency and transparency in how data is collected and reported on by the Scottish Government and industry. Timely reporting of that data makes it easier to find on the Scotland's aquaculture website and seems to be a reasonable solution to the issue. I welcome the fact that the cabinet secretary is now committed to modernising how data is presented on that website, but that work to improve accessibility is long overdue. It would certainly help the general public to understand more about salmon farming and might even help to dispel many of the concerns, myths and misconceptions about how the industry operates.

Another key point made in today's contributions was about the need for improvements to research and scientific evidence. That would develop a more robust evidence base about the environmental footprint of salmon farming and the impact on the marine environment of certain chemicals that are used by the industry, while also addressing gaps in knowledge about the interactions between farmed and wild salmon. The committee believes that dedicated research pens would not only help to answer some of those questions but would help Government to make better decisions about policy.

Several members discussed environmental and welfare considerations about the use of cleaner fish in salmon farming. Although the committee acknowledged the steps taken by industry and the Scottish Government to better protect the welfare of wrasse and lumpfish, we remain concerned by evidence about the welfare of those fish, and especially about the high mortality rates being reported and about the sustainability of wild wrasse fisheries. I know that the Scottish Government is expecting further advice on that from NatureScot and the Scottish Animal Welfare Commission, and I am sure we all hope that that will translate into concrete measures to enhance the welfare of those animals.

Colleagues spoke about the welfare of farmed fish, and Fergus Ewing mentioned the £1 billion that the industry has invested to promote good fish welfare at farms. The committee was supportive of that investment to market Scottish salmon as a premium product. We also noted the industry's need to balance treating fish to meet requirements regarding sea lice with the potential unintended consequences that that might have for fish health and welfare.

The committee recognises the economic contribution of the Scottish salmon farming sector, both as a successful national export and as a driver of prosperity in rural and island communities such as mine. It was also clear to the committee that the sector faces a number of environmental

and fish health challenges, especially in the wider context of climate change and rising sea temperatures, which the sector and the Scottish Government must understand and adapt to.

This debate does not signal the end of our interest in the issue. The committee will return before the end of this session of Parliament to consider what progress has been made in implementing our, and the REC Committee's, recommendations. We expect the Scottish Government to use its time wisely to make more tangible progress in future-proofing the industry.

Urgent Question

16:49

Project Willow

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to the project willow report.

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Gaelic (Kate Forbes): I thank the member for this opportunity to address the issue. I confirm that the Government was intending to bring a statement on the matter to Parliament.

The publication of the project willow report, which sets out a transformative future for Grangemouth, is to be welcomed. It marks an important milestone in our ambition to secure a long-term and sustainable future for Grangemouth that enshrines the industrial cluster's contribution to Scotland's economy and makes it a source of high-quality jobs on an on-going basis.

On the next steps, Scottish Enterprise and the UK Government Office for Investment will now lead work to bring the suggestions and other projects to fruition by working collaboratively across the private and public sectors to ensure the necessary investment to take them forward.

Stephen Kerr: I agree with the Deputy First Minister that we need to have as much parliamentary time as possible to discuss and debate the matter.

I welcome the publication of the project willow report, but let us be absolutely clear that serious uncertainties remain, the biggest of which, after all this time, is the position of Petroineos. The success of project willow and any real chance of attracting private investment hinge entirely on the availability of the Grangemouth site. If that site is not available, the proposed projects simply will not happen. When will Petroineos finally provide clarity on its intentions? More crucially, has it given the Scottish Government any indication at all that it is actually willing to invest in any of the proposed projects?

Kate Forbes: I agree with the principle of Stephen Kerr's question, which is that, now that we have received the project willow report, there is an opportunity, using UK and Scottish Government funding, to work with the private sector to make those investments, and Petroineos remains critical to the success of that process.

Mr Kerr will appreciate that Petroineos commissioned the work and has acted as the lead partner, which reflects its role as the owner and operator of the Grangemouth refinery, with UK and

Scottish Government funding. We have committed to working with it throughout the next stage, recognising its strategic importance to securing a long-term and sustainable future for the cluster. In short, we recognise the important role that Petroineos plays. Funding is now available through both Governments, and we will continue to work with Petroineos to secure the opportunities that the report highlights for its site.

Stephen Kerr: The Deputy First Minister was very careful in what she said. I respect that, but she did not really answer my direct questions, and that will be a cause of serious concern to the people of Grangemouth. The reality is that Petroineos has seen project willow throughout its journey. As the Deputy First Minister rightly says, the Scottish and UK Governments invested £1.5 million in the report, and the very least that many of us would have expected is that Petroineos would have declared or shown its hand by now.

Right now, there are more than 400 highly skilled jobs at Grangemouth that are set to vanish in the coming months. Those are real, well-paid jobs that are set to disappear. Meanwhile, the project willow report talks about jobs that might appear in 10 or 15 years' time. Let us be absolutely clear. Which of the nine proposed projects is likely to secure investment first? What is the realistic timescale for getting that project up and running? When exactly will the people of Grangemouth get the clarity that they deserve on their futures?

Kate Forbes: Those are all very important questions. The member will appreciate that I cannot speak for Petroineos, but I can speak for how the Scottish Government will work with it, and we recognise its strategic role. The projects that are projected to be taken forward in the near term focus on the recycling of plastics, acetone-butanol-ethanol biorefining, anaerobic digestion and fuel switching. If all nine of the potential projects are taken forward, which represents the base case, project willow could create about 800 jobs over the next decade and a bit and contribute £600 million to £700 million in gross value added.

We have to break down the projects that are closest to being realised quickly in order to protect jobs, with an eye on the horizon for the projects that will be deliverable in the medium term. We are, of course, actively engaged in supporting the workforce, which I accept is under immense pressure right now, through the partnership action for continuing employment—PACE—initiative and so on, to consider other opportunities. The member will know that there are a number of high-growth opportunities in the wider Grangemouth site that are looking to attract skilled workers—and the Grangemouth workforce is extremely highly skilled.

Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): The project willow study represents the art of the possible, but funding and business appetite will always be the drivers. The £200 million that may be available to draw down depends on projects being investable solutions according to the National Wealth Fund's criteria, not the UK Government. Business will take a risk only if there is policy and regulatory certainty, which there is not. How confident is the cabinet secretary that anything will come of the report? Does she recognise that the matter is, quite frankly, another of UK Labour's failures for Scotland?

Kate Forbes: The member is absolutely right to say that the value of any report is in how quickly its recommendations can be delivered on. The nine technologies that have been shortlisted from more than 300 technologies, following 120 stakeholder interviews, represent the greatest opportunities for Grangemouth. The key now will be in ensuring that the funding, which includes £200 million from the UK Government's National Wealth Fund plus the Scottish Government's £25 million, is invested in propositions and leverages private sector investment.

The member is also right to say that the UK Government money will support only investable propositions and will not take the form of grants. Therefore, we will push the UK Government, as I have done already, to ensure that its funding is as flexible as possible, that it is available now and that it will meet the needs of business. Alongside business, we are working with the unions and the workforce as we take the next steps, recognising the highly skilled workforce at Grangemouth.

All of that having been set out, it is now key that the money is made available as soon as possible, to be invested in the most investable propositions, in collaboration with business.

Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): I remind members of my voluntary register of trade union interests.

Many of project willow's outcomes are set in the medium term and even the long term, but, as Keynes said,

"In the long run, we are all dead."

Four hundred and thirty-five refinery workers face immediate redundancy, and nearly 3,000 workers in the supply chain are at risk. Will the Scottish Government be prepared to start investing to save these jobs now, and will it work with others to convert the existing refinery to a sustainable aviation fuel and biofuel site now rather than wait to build from scratch? These workers, this community and our economy cannot wait—we need decisive action now.

Kate Forbes: At the risk of agreeing with too many people, I agree with Richard Leonard that the challenges are being faced now. Although the project willow report sets out some technologies that will take a little longer to develop, there is an opportunity now, and I repeat that the Scottish Government's £25 million is there to be invested as quickly as possible. We have been pressing the UK Government to ensure that its £200 million is also made available as quickly as possible. Clearly, there are some projects that are near term, some of which I listed in my answer to Stephen Kerr.

The UK Government has indicated its intention to bring forward a price certainty mechanism for the development of sustainable aviation fuel, which needs to be done with urgency. It is not just funding that needs to be made available as a matter of urgency; some policy changes also need to be made and can be made quickly. We know that the UK Government has invested more than £50 million in Teesside through its advanced fuels fund. With sustainable aviation fuel being a clear recommendation in the project willow report, and with the support of Richard Leonard, I think that the UK Government needs to ensure that Scotland has the resources to manufacture SAF in Scotland. A couple of weeks ago, I was in London speaking to Michael Shanks precisely about policy changes that can be made in short order to accompany the funding that is being made available in short order.

Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green): Agreement of the operating principles of the delivery vehicle is one of the key issues in the next steps portion of the paper, to avoid a situation in which a project is set up, benefits from public investment, extracts profit and then leaves workers in the lurch when conditions change. What is the timescale for agreeing the operating principles? How will unions and workers be involved in agreeing those principles? What will the Scottish Government do to ensure that any funding comes with the appropriate strings, so that we see the projects that we want to see, with terms and conditions for workers that will last?

Kate Forbes: Gillian Mackay has set out some of the criteria for making the investments. I reassure her and others that we are keen to make those investments as quickly as possible, to support businesses but also with an eye on retaining the jobs and supporting growth in the workforce according to our fair work conditions.

We will work with the unions and the workforce as we take the next steps. We recognise the highly skilled workforce at Grangemouth. Their expertise is critical to securing a long-term and sustainable future for the site, and we will work as quickly as possible. We have ensured that Unite

the union has been well integrated into project willow at the regular standing committee meetings, and we have been engaging with it on an on-going basis on some of the issues.

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): We have heard from the Deputy First Minister that delivering the 800 jobs will require a huge amount of private investment—I think that it is £3.5 billion between now and 2040. What engagement has the Deputy First Minister had with various businesses to gauge the appetite for such huge levels of investment from Petroineos and other companies?

Kate Forbes: My colleague Gillian Martin engages regularly with Petroineos through the industry board. I, too, have engaged directly with a number of businesses that have expressed some interest in working in and around Grangemouth. The member will forgive me for not naming them, because that would be unfair and a conflict—a commercial issue. I reassure him that, although there is Scottish and UK Government funding available to progress the nine projects, that funding is to leverage private sector investment, and I think that there is interest. We need to put in place the policy circumstances and the environment to make the projects attractive, and we must work with Petroineos, which, as Stephen Kerr said, has a strategic relationship to the site.

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): The report highlights the need for an urgent decision on Acorn, because carbon capture and storage, which is of enormous importance to the north-east, could have a vital role to play in securing Grangemouth's future. In the light of that, many people will rightly be frustrated that the UK Government has repeatedly failed to prioritise investment in carbon capture and storage in Scotland. Does the cabinet secretary agree that a green light for Acorn is long overdue, both for Grangemouth and for industries in the north-east?

Kate Forbes: Yes is the short answer. We have been waiting far too long for progress on Acorn. The Acorn project is a stand-alone industrial transportation and storage project. It was committed to by the previous UK Government, and we are urgently looking for a meaningful update from the current UK Government, so that we can maintain momentum and provide investors with confidence.

It is vital that we support the decarbonisation of Scotland's industry and the future of Grangemouth. That will protect and create jobs, and, as was pointed out by business leaders last week, it will make a significant contribution to Scotland's economy.

Decision Time

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

17:04

Meeting closed at 17:04.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

There is one question to be put as a result of today's business. The question is, that motion S6M-16852, in the name of Finlay Carson, on behalf of the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee, on salmon farming in Scotland, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament notes the conclusions and recommendations contained in the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee's 1st Report, 2025 (Session 6), *Follow-up inquiry into salmon farming in Scotland* (SP Paper 720).

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