



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

DRAFT

Meeting of the Parliament

Thursday 29 May 2025

Session 6



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

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Scottish Parliament

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[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.

Roads (A75 Improvements)

1. Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the improvements to the A75. (S6O-04720)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): The Scottish Government recognises the strategic importance of the A75 and we are committed to improving safety, resilience and reliability for everyone who uses that key route.

A number of improvements are being delivered on the A75, including the introduction of signalisation at the Cuckoo Bridge roundabout, which is expected to get under way this year. Design and assessment work to consider options for realigning the A75 trunk road with bypasses at the villages of Springholm and Crocketford is also under way and is proceeding at pace. That work will culminate in the identification of a preferred route option for the scheme in early 2027.

Finlay Carson: The honest truth is that the Scottish National Party has failed to invest in the road—what we have heard about is a traffic lights upgrade. In reality, the bypasses at Crocketford and Springholm are being funded by the United Kingdom Government, so it is quite incredible that the cabinet secretary has refused to meet the local MP to discuss the matter.

In the light of yet another accident on the A75, this time near Gatehouse, which forced another closure, following the tragic fatal crash earlier this month near Castle Douglas, on top of the daily near misses because of poorly designed junctions at the Haugh of Urr and Twynholm, how can the Scottish Government continue to justify its chronic underinvestment in this vital arterial route through Dumfries and Galloway? After a decade of inaction, is now not the time to commit to a fully costed, time-bound upgrade plan for the A75 to ensure the safety and economic viability of the local communities, and the wider UK, that it serves?

Fiona Hyslop: I am aware of recent incidents, most recently just yesterday in the Ardwall area. I

have asked my Transport Scotland officials to work with local communities along the A75 to identify other improvements that can be made. However, on the issue of investment that the member raises, I reiterate that, since 2007, we have completed six major road improvement projects along the A75, with a value of more than £50 million, and we have invested more than £152 million to ensure its safe and efficient operation.

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): The reality is that the only investment on the table for meaningful upgrade work is from the UK Government for the bypasses at Crocketford and Springholm. How much does the Scottish Government plan to invest in upgrade work going forward, given that roads are ultimately the responsibility of this Government?

Fiona Hyslop: Recommendation 40 of the second strategic transport projects review identifies the importance of continued investment and improvement in that area. We are almost damned if we do and damned if we don't. If we co-operate with the UK Government, we will be attacked for doing so. Do members want co-operation or do they not want co-operation?

The A75 is strategically important, in particular to traffic to Northern Ireland and onwards to the Republic of Ireland. That is why I raised it with other UK ministers, including the Northern Ireland transport minister, when I met them very recently at the British-Irish Council transport ministers meeting in Belfast.

I take the issue very seriously, and I am engaging on it. Members will have to decide whether they want co-operation or not.

Road Safety (Highlands and Islands)

2. Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what measures it has introduced in the last year to improve road safety across the Highlands and Islands. (S6O-04721)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): Over the past year, the Scottish Government has implemented a range of measures to improve road safety across the Highlands and Islands. Those include £1.7 million for targeted engineering improvements on the A9, and £14 million for local authorities to improve road safety and introduce 20mph limits where appropriate.

In 2025-26, a further £48 million will support a further range of measures, including national driver behaviour campaigns, targeted infrastructure improvements and safety camera deployments. That includes £20 million for local authorities to make local roads safer and to complete the roll-out of 20mph limits.

Collectively, those efforts are designed to reduce the number of people being killed or seriously injured on roads across Scotland, including in the Highlands and Islands.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: Those of us who use the A9, or any of the other major or smaller roads across the Highlands and Islands, will be well aware that visitor numbers are already increasing ahead of the summer. This time last year, I asked the cabinet secretary about some of the specific issues that are caused by camper van drivers, those using e-bikes and other visitors who are unfamiliar with roads that are often challenging and, too often, are in a poor state of repair.

Is the cabinet secretary confident that the Scottish Government is doing enough to improve road safety across the Highlands and Islands in particular? Will she reassure me that she believes that my constituents are safer on our roads this year than they were last year?

Fiona Hyslop: In relation to the member's concern about visitors, I thank him for the opportunity to announce that we launched our drive on the left campaign this week. It provides clear, practical advice for overseas drivers, including how to use passing places and navigate junctions, and states the importance of staying alert and keeping left, particularly when roads are quiet. Those resources are available on the Road Safety Scotland website.

We are working with the tourism and hospitality sectors, including vehicle-rental companies, to help visitors to remain safe. I encourage Jamie Halcro Johnston and all MSPs who have visitors in their constituency or region to share that campaign material.

Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): One of the challenges in the Highlands and Islands is that many people who drive on single-track roads are not used to doing so. Frustration builds when there is a mix of people who are travelling too slowly and driving too fast. As we head towards another busy summer season, what advice would the cabinet secretary offer drivers in the Highlands and Islands and elsewhere in rural Scotland?

Fiona Hyslop: I would ask the member to share the materials that I just talked about. All road users—those who live here as well as visitors—need to be safe. We recognise that rural and island routes, especially single-track roads, can be challenging for those who are unfamiliar with driving them. Rapid weather changes, quiet stretches, driver frustration—as the member talked about—and unfamiliarity add to risk. That is why driver behaviour and the communications that we are working on are important. I encourage

everyone to promote the materials to which I referred.

Road Works (M8 Glasgow)

3. **Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what its position is on whether the road works on the M8 in Glasgow will be completed by 2026. (S6O-04722)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): The M8 Woodside viaducts project is a complex one that involves constructing temporary propping in a constrained urban environment to enable repairs to the half-joints that support the motorway. Transport Scotland and its contractor, Amey, have been examining each and every activity that is required to complete the works to ensure completion as soon as possible.

However, there have been delays to the piling work around the subway tunnel, which has to be carried out very carefully. That information was explained to elected members, including Ms McNeill, when they attended a site visit and were briefed by the Transport Scotland project team. Uncharted obstructions have recently been discovered, and officials are assessing them to determine whether they might impact on the current estimated completion dates.

I will notify the public of any changes to the project timeline when they are known. I acknowledge the disruption that is being experienced by the travelling public and the local community, and I appreciate the patience of road users. However, the work is essential to ensure the safety and longevity of that section of the M8 for the approximately 150,000 road users who travel on that section of the motorway daily.

Pauline McNeill: The M8 project in Glasgow was due for completion in late 2023. Since 2021, those using the M8 have had constant delays as part of their daily commute, which is impacting on the west of Scotland economy. We know that the project is complex, and I am glad that the cabinet secretary has acknowledged the impact on the public.

However, the works are being advertised as “to be completed in early 2026”

on the Transport Scotland website. Is the cabinet secretary at all concerned that Transport Scotland wrote to me on 21 May to say that it now cannot confirm that completion date—which is what I think the cabinet secretary is saying today—but that the website still says that the work will be completed in “early 2026”? It is unacceptable that the public, who are putting up with these delays, are not getting up-to-date, accurate information. In fact, as far as I can see, the website is just a showcase for Amey. Will the cabinet secretary tell Parliament

and the public what is being done to bring the project in on the timescale that is scheduled, or as soon as possible?

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Ms McNeill.

Pauline McNeill: Obviously, that would take into account overtime and anything else.

Fiona Hyslop: I am more than happy to ask officials to ensure that the website is up to date. I have explained the recent issues, particularly in relation to unanticipated concerns. What is unacceptable is to question the work that is required to ensure that the works are carried out safely. As of May 2025, props have been installed at 13 of a total of 23 locations and 10 locations have been fully jacked, meaning that the load from the bridge deck is being transferred away from the existing supports and on to the newly installed propping system. I understand members' requests and interest in the work; that is why I personally asked for MSPs and councillors to be updated. I am more than happy to arrange a further briefing for Ms McNeill from officials, as she has had previously.

The Presiding Officer: I ask members for concise questions and responses.

Protecting Vulnerable Groups Scheme

4. Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Presiding Officer, I apologise that I arrived in the chamber slightly late today.

To ask the Scottish Government what feedback it has received from organisations, including sport and social clubs, regarding changes in the protecting vulnerable groups scheme as a result of the Disclosure (Scotland) Act 2020. (S6O-04723)

The Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise (Natalie Don-Innes): Disclosure Scotland engages regularly with sectors that use its services. Feedback received covers a range of areas related to the PVG scheme, highlighting needs and questions and addressing what works well.

The PVG scheme covers a diverse base of stakeholders, some of which have unique needs and concerns, but feedback is continuously addressed and has led to the provision of additional guidance for certain sectors, alongside training workshops and a dedicated stakeholder engagement function.

Tim Eagle: I thank the minister for an early discussion on that. A number of clubs have contacted me about a potentially unintended consequence of the changes to the PVG rules. We are fortunate to have many young people who support sports and social clubs before they are 16, but, as soon as they turn 16, they must have a PVG certificate, and there is some confusion

about when they can apply for that, with clubs worried that they will have to ask young people to stop volunteering, potentially for months, before a PVG certificate application is approved. Does the minister agree that we do not want to discourage young people from volunteering, and can she clarify the latest information from Disclosure Scotland with regard to when 16-year-olds can apply for a PVG certificate and how that is being communicated to clubs?

Natalie Don-Innes: Yes, absolutely, and I would like to provide clarity today. In response to feedback, Disclosure Scotland has developed an exceptions process to allow children to apply for PVG scheme membership from the age of 15 years and eight months, so that it is active from their 16th birthday in order to prevent what Mr Eagle has referred to from happening. The exceptions process is available across all sectors, including sports, and it was put in place to support young people who leave school and move into a regulated role as their chosen career or to a further education pathway that can include training or work in sports coaching.

The process requires the child to make a paper application, which will be processed to commence from their 16th birthday. However, as a result of what Mr Eagle raised with me, we will look at the guidance and work with Disclosure Scotland on the information that is being provided to ensure that it reflects an accurate position.

Honouring Prominent Figures

5. Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government how its policies to support Scottish culture and heritage ensure that the contribution of prominent figures, such as trade unionist, Michael McGahey, can be honoured. (S6O-04724)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): The 2023 culture strategy for Scotland aims to extend the view of culture to include the everyday and the emerging, the established and the more formal, recognising each community's own local cultures and encouraging collaboration across partners to realise the transformational power of culture. It is by recognising that culture and heritage helps to bring us together, celebrates our achievements and reminds us of our shared past that communities can also examine the contribution of key figures at the centre of our history, such as Michael McGahey, who was an early champion of this Parliament.

The Scottish Government has demonstrated our commitment to the culture sector and the heritage sector, with an increase of more than £34 million in 2025-26. That takes us to more than £50 million more in culture funding than in 2023-2024.

Richard Leonard: Today marks the centenary of the birth of Mick McGahey, born in Shotts on this day in 1925. He described himself as a product of his movement and his class. Self-educated, internationalist in outlook and never afraid to hide his politics. Is that not a life to be celebrated? Are these not values to be revered? What is the Scottish Government going to do to nurture future generations of trade unionists and to ensure that working-class history is properly recognised in our cultural heritage and properly taught in our education system? And would our politics today not benefit from a bit more of the principle, the honesty and the integrity that Mick McGahey stood for all of his life?

Fiona Hyslop: I thank the member for his tribute to Michael McGahey on the anniversary of his birth. I recognise his role. Indeed, as a young nationalist, I engaged personally with Mick McGahey through dialogue and debate—he took time to listen and to debate. Our politics would be far better if there was more listening, engagement and understanding of people from different persuasions.

I also recognise the existing monuments. I was struck by the one in King George V park in Bonnyrigg that was unveiled in 2006. It is a simple, rough-hewn block of stone with a low-relief profile of Michael McGahey, which includes a dedication that reads:

“We are a movement, not a monument.”

The member has recognised that trade unions, education and all those aspects are part of our culture and heritage. I encourage everyone to recognise that the Scotland that we want is a Scotland that embraces all of that and that there are ways of articulating that by lots of different means and measures.

Budget (East Kilbride)

6. Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how its budget aims to benefit people in East Kilbride. (S6O-04725)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Shona Robison): The Scottish budget delivers against the Government's priorities to eradicate child poverty, grow the economy, tackle the climate emergency and ensure high-quality and sustainable public services across the whole of Scotland. For people in East Kilbride, that will include more than £820 million of funding for South Lanarkshire Council.

Collette Stevenson: From national insurance hikes to cutting winter fuel payments for pensioners, the United Kingdom Labour Government's reckless decisions are having a huge impact on people and businesses in East

Kilbride and across the country. I have heard from local community groups that cannot get access to a community space to carry out their valuable work due to local Labour cuts in South Lanarkshire.

Meanwhile, this year, the council is spending around £49 million on private finance initiative repayments—a toxic legacy from the previous Labour Government. Our communities are paying the price. Will the cabinet secretary outline the additional money that is being given to South Lanarkshire Council this year and how the Scottish Government supports grass-roots and community organisations to continue their valuable work?

Shona Robison: Collette Stevenson is, of course, quite right to highlight those issues. In addition to the £823.9 million of direct funding to South Lanarkshire Council, there is also £23 million to support the town centre redevelopment through the Glasgow city region deal, and £144 million for the East Kilbride rail enhancement project, which will be completed by December 2025 and will include the newly opened, fully accessible Hairmyres station.

We are also providing £24 million towards the community growth areas projects, including support for works at Jackton primary school, the extension of Our Lady of Lourdes primary school and Hairmyres park-and-ride plans.

Independent School Pupils (Fees for Hospital Teaching Costs)

7. Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what discussions the education secretary has had with national health service boards and local authorities regarding the levying of fees for hospital teaching costs for children who routinely attend independent schools. (S6O-04726)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): Hospital education services are normally run by the local authority and relevant NHS boards for the area in which the hospital is based, using teachers who are employed by their home local authority. Those services also invite referrals for pupils from independent schools as well as pupils from local authority-run schools in other areas when a pupil is required to stay in hospital for a prolonged period of time.

Decisions about the fees to be charged for hospital education services are therefore a matter for local authorities and NHS boards to consider with independent schools as appropriate.

Craig Hoy: Sick children who attend independent schools but who are being treated in hospital are being denied access to education unless they pay £115 an hour for teaching that

would be free if they went to a state school. Lawrence, the son of two of my constituents, was diagnosed with leukaemia in March and he will not return to the Compass school until the autumn. His parents already pay tax towards state education that they do not use and VAT on school fees. They are required to rent a flat to be near the hospital where their son is being treated.

Lawrence has already had the distress of watching other children in his ward receive education that the City of Edinburgh Council provides, but which he cannot access. That is discrimination that cannot be compliant with the Scottish Government's policy of getting it right for every child, nor with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Will the cabinet secretary urgently look at the Scottish Government's guidance to councils on the issue and, if necessary, provide them with additional resources to ensure universal access to education for all sick children, regardless of where they are normally educated?

Jenny Gilruth: I thank Craig Hoy for raising an important issue. To give him some assurance, I can say that my officials have engaged directly with the City of Edinburgh Council on the substance of his remarks today. Although I will not comment on the specific issues, I will reflect on my engagement with officials in relation to our guidance.

I should be clear that, at the current time, our national guidance does not make any specific reference to independent schools in relation to charging. It would certainly be my expectation that, when a pupil attends an independent school, there should be a discussion with that school on those matters. However, I am happy to take away the point that the member raises today and to engage further on the substance of it in relation to our national guidance and the role of the City of Edinburgh Council as a local authority.

First Minister's Question Time

12:00

Climate Change Committee (Advice)

1. **Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con):**

The Climate Change Committee's new report sets out what the Scottish Government would need to do to reach its 2045 net zero target. It would have to reduce oil and gas production by 91 per cent, which would devastate the industry and our economy. It would have to ask home owners to meet stringent and expensive new energy standards. It would have to get more than half the population to drive electric cars or vans by 2035. For electric cars, the current figure is just 2.2 per cent, and for electric vans it is less than 1 per cent.

The report lays bare the crippling cost to hard-working families and businesses. Does John Swinney think that the committee's proposals are realistic?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The Government will carefully consider the advice of the Climate Change Committee before we set out our proposed carbon budgets in secondary legislation in due course. There are a lot of policy proposals in the committee's recommendations. The Government will consider those. However, what is absolutely inescapable is that we have to take action to tackle climate change in our society. That is why the Government is absolutely committed to achieving net zero by 2045—because the implications and consequences of not doing so would be very dramatic and damaging for Scotland and our economy.

Russell Findlay: Let us take a look at some of the specific suggestions in the report. To meet the Scottish National Party's net zero target, the number of cattle and sheep in Scotland would need to fall by 2 million—meaning a cull of 2 million animals in the next decade—which is around 25 per cent. That would drive farmers out of business, destroy the rural economy and put our food security at risk. The report says that Scots would need to eat one third less meat. That is utter madness. It is an act of national self-harm. Will John Swinney rule out going ahead with that specific plan?

The First Minister: As I have said, the Government will consider the advice of the Climate Change Committee in an orderly fashion, and we will set out our own proposals for taking the action that is absolutely necessary. There has been parliamentary consensus on the importance of achieving net zero by 2045, which has been supported across the political spectrum. The Government will consider specific proposals and

bring them forward, and the Parliament will have the opportunity to decide whether those proposals should be approved or not.

Russell Findlay: There is absolutely no reassurance for farmers in that answer.

Let us look at another measure in the report. Fewer than 1 per cent of Scotland's homes have a heat pump, but to meet the SNP's 2045 target, that figure would need to reach almost 70 per cent. The number of annual installations would need to increase fivefold in just five years' time. That is before we work out how people would afford heat pumps, given that they typically cost between £8,000 and £15,000. That proposal is simply not realistic, and if it was imposed, it would hammer hard-working Scots. Will John Swinney please rule it out now?

The First Minister: Mr Findlay talked about reassurance for farmers. As a representative of a constituency that includes many members of the farming community, I take the commitment to support the future of Scottish agriculture very seriously, and it has always been reflected—*[Interruption.]* That commitment has always been reflected in my policy priorities.

I can tell the Parliament that what was not reassuring to farmers was Brexit, which Mr Findlay supported. That has damaged the economic opportunities—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear one another.

The First Minister: In the Brexit—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Mr Ross, you have persistently refused to abide by our standing orders. I ask you to leave the chamber; you are excluded for the rest of the day.

The First Minister: The issue of Brexit—

The Presiding Officer: Excuse me, First Minister. Mr Ross, I have asked you to leave the chamber. Please do so.

First Minister, please continue.

The First Minister: Reassurance for farmers was absent in the Brexit that the Conservatives imposed on us, and it has caused incalculable—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Mr Lumsden, please refrain from shouting from your seat.

The First Minister: Brexit has caused incalculable damage to the farming industry in Scotland, and this Government is working to repair that damage.

My second point is that the targets for reaching net zero by 2045 are not those of the SNP—they are the Parliament's. They were democratically

agreed to by the Parliament because we all recognised the importance of climate action.

What we see in front of us just now is obvious: the Conservatives are deserting the action that is necessary on climate for a cheap political opportunity. However, this Government will do what it always does, which is to act in the best interests of the people of Scotland and to secure the future of our country.

Russell Findlay: I can only share my colleague's frustration at this weekly exercise in deflection and evasion. The SNP has missed its eco-targets for years. Its expert advisers now confirm that the only way to reach net zero by 2045 is by imposing radical and financially devastating policies.

If John Swinney sticks to his target, he has to be honest with the people of Scotland about the price that he expects them to pay. People will be forced to ditch petrol cars, rip out their boilers and change their diets. Farmers will need to get rid of cattle. Scotland's oil and gas industry will cease to exist. All of it will be paid for through higher taxes and higher household bills. None of it makes sense to people in the real world. It is just not realistic or affordable. Does John Swinney agree, or will he continue to make promises that he knows that the SNP cannot keep?

The First Minister: Between 1990 and 2022, Scotland's emissions halved, while the economy grew by 66.6 per cent. I cite that information to note to the Parliament that it is possible for us to grow our economy and reduce our emissions by sensible investment. What does that sensible investment involve? It involves supporting the transition to renewable energy—and I mean the transition to renewable energy—whereby we manage carefully the way in which we generate our energy by attracting investment—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear the First Minister.

The First Minister: —which we are successfully doing to secure the energy future of our country. That is the commitment of the Scottish Government: to ensure that we deliver a just transition, grow the economy and always take action to protect the interests of the people of Scotland. The SNP Government will do that while the Conservatives play politics with the opportunists.

National Health Service Waiting Lists

2. **Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab):** Another week and another set of damning statistics demonstrate the Scottish National Party's mismanagement of our NHS. There are now 860,925 people on an NHS waiting list, which is

one in six Scots. Of those people, 105,953 have been waiting for more than a year, and more than 13,000 Scots have been waiting for more than two years, which is the highest number ever recorded.

There is a human cost to that. Just one example is Tracey Meechan, who has waited more than 100 weeks to be treated for an ovarian cyst. She is living in pain, has constant anxiety, is desperate to work but cannot and is unable to do as much with her children as she wants. Why are hundreds of thousands of Scottish patients such as Tracey paying the price for SNP failure?

The First Minister (John Swinney): As I have explained in the Parliament on many occasions before, I recognise the significant impact of long waits on individual patients. I apologise to everybody who is affected by those long waits. That impact is why tackling long waits is central to the Government's plans to deliver the improvements in the national health service that are required.

I am aware of the case of Tracey Meechan; I saw the media reports on it. My officials have already contacted NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde to raise her case with it. We are advised that dialogue is under way with Ms Meechan about the procedure and I hope that that leads to progress.

However, there are obviously many other people like Ms Meechan who are waiting for treatment, and I apologise for those circumstances. For that reason, the Government has made the largest-ever investment in the national health service. Based on the most recent initiative that we took to tackle the volume of transactions and procedures in the health service, we expected there to be 64,000 additional appointments and procedures by March this year—in fact, we achieved 105,500.

I hope that that gives Mr Sarwar and members of the public reassurance that the Government is focusing on expanding capacity to tackle the issue that he raises.

Anas Sarwar: Week after week, John Swinney comes to the chamber and apologises, and things continue to get worse. People do not want to hear "Sorry"—they want treatment, and that is on the SNP Government. Time after time, the SNP has promised to get to grips with the crisis in our NHS. It promised recovery after the pandemic, but the situation has only got worse. The Government is now on to its fifth NHS recovery plan, its fourth health minister and its third First Minister since that promise, and the crisis only deepens.

Thousands of people are, like Tracey Meechan, waiting more than two years for procedures in specialisms that include ear, nose and throat, neurosurgery, orthopaedics—that is, hip and knee

replacements—and gynaecology, including ovarian surgery. When will John Swinney finally come clean and admit that he and his Government have utterly failed and that he has no plan to fix Scotland's NHS?

The First Minister: I welcome the acknowledgement in Mr Sarwar's question of the significant impact of the Covid pandemic. All of us must realise that the pandemic had a serious and detrimental effect on the ability of the NHS, over a period of about two years, to tackle the health issues that members of the public face.

That is why we have in place a plan to focus on expanding capacity. What I set out earlier this year involves enhancing the capacity of national treatment centres; expanding regional delivery of healthcare services in order to increase levels of activity; and putting in place additional capacity in hospitals such as Gartnavel general hospital, Inverclyde royal hospital, Stracathro hospital, Perth royal infirmary and Queen Margaret hospital to deliver more procedures in exactly the specialisms that Mr Sarwar put to me.

I acknowledge the scale of the challenge. We are putting in place the practical expansion of capacity to make sure that we can treat more patients, which is exactly what the Government is focused on doing.

Anas Sarwar: Just like this SNP Government, the plan is not working, and Scotland needs a new direction.

There is a human cost to SNP failure. Take the case of Eileen Kelly, who is an 80-year-old grandmother from the south side of Glasgow. Eileen is living with severe osteoarthritis in both hips—so severe, in fact, that her entire right hip has disintegrated. When she most needed help, she was told that she faced a wait of two and a half years on the NHS. Due to the severe pain that she is in, she has paid more than £10,000 to be treated privately. Eileen told me that she lives two flights up and has been left immobile and in agony. She has worked and paid taxes all her life, but when she needed the NHS, the SNP let her down. She feels betrayed and abandoned.

That is the reality of the NHS after two decades of SNP rule: one in six Scots is on an NHS waiting list, waits are soaring and thousands are being forced to go private. Why has John Swinney and SNP incompetence left our NHS on life support?

The First Minister: In his previous question, Mr Sarwar referenced the significance of the Covid pandemic. All of us must be realistic and recognise that the Covid pandemic interrupted the ability to deliver healthcare services for members of the public for a two-year period. It takes a period of time to recover from such an event, and focus and direction are needed to ensure that the

process is successful. The measures that I have set out on the expansion of capacity are designed to ensure that that is the case.

I am sorry that Eileen Kelly has had the experience that she has had. Obviously, there are individuals who receive treatment earlier than was promised in her circumstance, because there is an ability to put forward legitimate clinical cases for urgent intervention where such intervention is able to be undertaken. If Mr Sarwar wants to furnish me with the details of the case, I will examine exactly what has happened in that circumstance.

We are working to make sure that we have in place the staff and the resources to address the issue. What will not help us is the approach that is now being taken on immigration by the United Kingdom Government. Anyone who has looked at the details of what it has set out, which involves turning off our ability to attract international workers, will realise that that is a very damaging blow to our health service. I saw data from Scottish Care on social care—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear one another.

The First Minister: —and the sector is heavily dependent on international workers. If the UK Government decides to turn off the ability of the Scottish health service to attract international workers, that will make our challenge in addressing the waiting times issue ever more difficult. That will be a consequence of the actions of the UK Government.

Therefore, I appeal to Mr Sarwar to join me in what I said to the Prime Minister on Friday: the immigration proposals will be damaging to our national health service, and we do not want anything to do with them.

Flamingo Land (Planning Appeal)

3. Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): Outside Parliament today, people gathered to express their anger at the Scottish Government's intention to approve a resort development by Flamingo Land on the shores of Loch Lomond. The proposal has been opposed by the National Trust for Scotland, the Scottish Environment Protection Agency and more than 155,000 people, and it was rejected unanimously by the Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park Authority. It is the most unpopular development in the history of the Scottish planning system.

I know that the First Minister is about to tell us that he cannot comment on a specific appeal, but his minister has already made a political decision. It took Ivan McKee just two working days to announce his refusal to act in the public interest and recall the appeal, so he and the First Minister must be accountable for that now. There is still a

chance that we can save Loch Lomond—the decision is not set in stone—so will the First Minister listen to all those who have been objecting for years, put the natural environment ahead of corporate profit and recall the decision?

The First Minister (John Swinney): As Mr Harvie indicated, the appeal remains live, so members must understand that it would not be appropriate for me to comment in detail on the proposal. I am aware that the reporter has issued a notice of intention to allow the appeal and to grant planning permission in principle, subject to 49 planning conditions being met and a legal agreement—including on the Lomond promise, which includes a commitment to community benefits and fair work—being reached. The reporter is required to make his decision on the planning merits of the case and to take full account of all submissions made by the parties involved in the case, including representations from members of the local community.

Patrick Harvie: I am afraid that I really do not think that the First Minister is even attempting to acknowledge the scale of the anger about the issue—anger that has been demonstrated by people outside Parliament today and by the 44,000 people who have already written to the minister—as a result of an unnecessary, unwanted and destructive development.

However, this is not the first time that he has defended such a development. In 2007, when John Swinney had been in government for less than a year, he overturned a local planning decision to approve another controversial, environmentally destructive project from a greedy, bullying developer. In that case, of course, the decision was made to give Donald Trump his golf course. Even Trump's project director from those days has made it clear that the Government was hoodwinked.

The First Minister is not standing up for Scotland. Did he learn nothing from his mistake? Why is he still willing to back greedy developers who cannot look at a landscape without seeing an opportunity to bulldoze it for profit?

The First Minister: I am absolutely committed to protecting Scotland's natural environment. In all the decisions and steps that I take, I value and cherish that natural environment. The reporter has to come to a decision that is based on the planning merits of the case. In this circumstance, on a range of different conditions, the reporter has established a notice of intention to allow the appeal, subject to 49 planning conditions that I am sure address the issues that Mr Harvie is raising with me. Those issues have to be the subject of further discussion. That is the proper exercise of the planning process, which I am obliged by law to ensure is the case.

Winter Fuel Payment

4. Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): To ask the First Minister whether he will provide an update on the Scottish Government's latest engagement with the United Kingdom Government regarding its plans for the winter fuel payment and any implications for the Scottish Government's work to deliver a universal pensioner age winter heating payment in Scotland. (S6F-04125)

The First Minister (John Swinney): Since the Prime Minister made his announcement, the Scottish Government has not been furnished with detail, and the lack of information is only adding further to the uncertainty. The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government wrote to the Chief Secretary to the Treasury this week to urge the UK Government to share its plans with us as quickly as possible, so that we can understand any implications for our own programmes and, crucially, our budget.

Clare Adamson: Under pressure, the Prime Minister has in effect admitted that Labour's winter fuel payment cut was wrong, but the lack of information from the UK Government on how, when or whether it will means test the winter fuel payment is causing anxiety for pensioners. Are our pensioners to be kept in the dark, as well as in the cold?

The First Minister: Clare Adamson is right to highlight the lack of information since the Prime Minister made his statement a week ago yesterday. We await further detail and the implications for Scotland.

Pensioners in Scotland should be absolutely assured that, when the Labour Government decided, as one of its first acts, to remove winter fuel payments from pensioners, the Scottish National Party Government stepped in and introduced a universal payment that will provide support to more than 812,000 pensioner households in Scotland—support that is not available anywhere else in the United Kingdom. The people of Scotland and, crucially, the pensioners of Scotland can see that, where the Labour Government takes away the winter fuel payment, the Scottish National Party Government will restore it.

Play Parks (Renewal)

5. Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): To ask the First Minister, in light of it being almost five years since the Scottish Government committed to spending £60 million to renew every play park in Scotland and of reports that less than half of the funding has been spent, what action the Scottish Government is taking to ensure that children do not miss out on renewed facilities. (S6F-04139)

The First Minister (John Swinney): The Scottish Government has provided £35 million to local authority partners, which has already led to the renewal of 1,100 play parks since September 2021. In 2025-26, we are providing a further £25 million to help to accelerate local authorities' plans and to make more parks welcoming, free and accessible spaces for all children to enjoy. That means that our £60 million commitment will be met by my Government. On the basis of a scoping exercise that the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities undertook in 2022, we estimate that that will allow a total renewal of nearly 2,000 play parks, including all parks that are assessed by local authorities as being in need of immediate renewal.

Stephen Kerr: That sounds like another Swinney broken promise. The First Minister promised a free tablet or laptop and an internet connection for every child in Scotland. He promised to provide a free bike for every child, to close the attainment gap, to recruit an additional 3,500 teachers and to ensure that every primary school pupil would receive free school breakfasts and lunches all year round. He has failed on every promise, and now he will fail on delivering the promise of refurbishing every play park by the end of this session of Parliament. Why should the people of this country believe anything that he says, when everywhere we look we see the SNP Government offering up big, empty election gimmicks and then failing to deliver?

The Presiding Officer: I remind all members that we use full names or titles in the chamber.

The First Minister: I think that Stephen Kerr needs to go to a play park to get rid of some of his excess energy. He seems—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear one another.

The First Minister: He seems just a little bit too excited for words today.

Let me inject some basic arithmetic into Parliament today—25 plus 35 equals 60, which equals the fulfilment of the Government's promise. One of the basic foundations of being a member of Parliament is that, when you do not get the answer that you expect, you have to pivot to deal with it. Mr Kerr cannot handle that.

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): I have a bizarre and inexplicable tolerance of Mr Kerr, who is like that black cloud that appears on a sunny day, even if only temporarily. [*Interruption.*] Can I—

The Presiding Officer: Ms Grahame, please take your seat.

Mr Lumsden, were you trying to attract attention? I am just asking why you were shouting from your seat. Please desist.

Christine Grahame: On playgrounds—apart from the fact that Mr Kerr seems to need an abacus rather than a playground—I commend the fact that £800,000 has already been allocated in the Borders, and £1 million in Midlothian. On a serious note, after Covid, when children were socially isolated for so long, it is excellent that they can now have fresh air and fun and be liberated to the safe space of a playground—not too safe, but safe enough.

The First Minister: Christine Grahame makes an incredibly powerful point. In the aftermath of Covid, when, as we all know, there were negative implications for children and young people in our society, making sure that there are good facilities for them to enjoy is part of the work that we have to do.

Some weeks ago, I had the pleasure, with the Deputy First Minister, of seeing some of the improvement work that has been undertaken in Kirkintilloch, and it is happening in other parts of the country. I am not surprised that it has been welcomed by my wise colleague Christine Grahame.

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): The Scottish Government's promise was to renew every play park. Will it be every play park?

The First Minister: I answered the point in my earlier answer, where a scoping—[*Interruption.*]

Stephen Kerr: You did not.

The Presiding Officer: Mr Kerr, you have had an opportunity to put questions to the First Minister. I now ask you to desist from shouting from your seat.

The First Minister: The Government undertook an exercise with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and worked with our local authority partners to determine the way in which the approach could best complement local work. That is the Government working in partnership with local authorities. That is what Parliament always asks us to do, and once again the Government has delivered.

Environmental Protection (Keeping Pace with European Union)

6. Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab): To ask the First Minister what action the Scottish Government is taking to maintain its policy aim of keeping pace with the EU on environmental protection. (S6F-04140)

The First Minister (John Swinney): The Scottish Government is committed to remaining

aligned with the EU where it is possible and meaningful for Scotland to do so. That commitment is reflected in our annual reports to the Scottish Parliament on the use of the alignment power under the UK Withdrawal from the European Union (Continuity) (Scotland) Act 2021. Many of our environmental regulations were derived from EU law, and that is an important area for consideration of alignment. We are currently assessing the revised EU environmental crime directive, including its provision of higher penalties for serious environmental harm that is equivalent to ecocide.

Monica Lennon: The proposed ecocide (prevention) (Scotland) bill would make it a criminal offence to cause widespread, long-term or irreversible environmental damage, with penalties of up to 20 years in prison for individuals and unlimited fines for organisations. Ecocide law was pioneered by trailblazing Scottish lawyer the late Polly Higgins. The EU and many countries worldwide are acting to deter and punish such devastating crimes, and this is Scotland's time to act. Does the First Minister agree with the bill's aims? Does he welcome this vital opportunity for Scotland to become the first UK nation to criminalise ecocide?

The First Minister: I compliment Monica Lennon on the diligent work that she has undertaken to engage with many stakeholders and parties, and also with the Government, on the formulation of the bill that she is to introduce to Parliament. I recognise the importance that she attaches to that piece of legislation, and the Government understands the significance of the points that are raised. We will, of course, consider the bill that Monica Lennon is going to introduce, and we would welcome further dialogue with her on the issue.

We are committed to the protection of our natural environment, as represented by the introduction in February of the Natural Environment (Scotland) Bill. We will give very serious consideration to the conduct and issues that Monica Lennon raises, because the implications and impact of those issues are detrimental to our natural environment, which we have to protect.

Scottish Funding Council and University of Dundee (Financial Agreement)

7. Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): To ask the First Minister for what reason there has reportedly been no financial agreement between the Scottish Funding Council and the University of Dundee, in light of the alternative financial recovery plan being launched four weeks ago. (S6F-04138)

The First Minister (John Swinney): The University of Dundee is an autonomous institution that is responsible for its own decision-making powers and must consider whether further financial support is required. As of this morning, we have not yet received any request from the Scottish Funding Council. However, as I have reiterated throughout this situation, the Scottish Government and the Funding Council will give careful consideration to any request for additional support within the legislative framework.

I am encouraged by the university's commitment to minimise job losses, but it is vital that the university consults on its revised plan with its community, including trade unions, and with the strategic advisory task force, which is chaired by Sir Alan Langlands.

Willie Rennie: The situation has been agonising for university staff. A cloud has been hanging over them since November, which is seven months ago. They simply cannot understand why we still have no financial agreement four weeks on from the publication of the new financial recovery plan. One staff member had tears in her eyes as she told me about the toll that it is taking on her and her family. How much longer does the First Minister think that she will have to wait?

The First Minister: First, I sympathise and empathise with the point that Mr Rennie raises with me on behalf of his constituent. At my constituency surgery on Monday, I had a member of staff come to see me in my constituency capacity, who in essence conveyed the very same message, so I understand entirely where Mr Rennie is coming from, and I want to make sure that the Government acts properly and effectively to address the legitimate concerns that he puts to me. He will of course acknowledge, because he is entirely familiar with our legislative arrangements, that the University of Dundee operates as an autonomous institution. It has to take the initiative to come to the Funding Council and the Government.

I assure Mr Rennie that the issue has the most active engagement of the First Minister, the Deputy First Minister, the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills and the Minister for Higher and Further Education within Government. We are ready to consider any requests that are made to us properly by the University of Dundee and the Funding Council.

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): I have met university staff and this is what one staff member said to me:

"The weight of not knowing, of being left in limbo, is taking a huge toll on mental health and morale. It is not just us. It is our families, too. The endless delays and broken

promises from management and Government are leaving us all in despair. When will they do something?"

The Government's target is 300 job losses, and the costings, I am told, have now been submitted and are with officials. Will the First Minister commit to Parliament today that the voluntary severance scheme will be in place and open by the end of next week?

The First Minister: Mr Marra knows that I cannot give that commitment, because that would be me dictating to an independent institution how it should go about its own governance, and I would break the law if I did that—it is as simple as that.

Michael Marra: Ask it.

The First Minister: I am trying to give Mr Marra a substantive answer, if he would allow me to do that.

I understand the anxieties of members of staff, because they come to my constituency surgeries. I hear those very directly, and I totally accept the worry and anxiety that is caused, but I have to operate within the existing legal framework. I give Mr Marra, as I give to Parliament and to members of staff at the University of Dundee, the absolute commitment that the Government is engaging actively and promptly on all these questions.

Lastly, I gave to Parliament on a previous occasion my absolute commitment to securing the future of the University of Dundee. I unreservedly reiterate that in front of Parliament today, and the Government will follow that approach in all that we do.

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

Inward Investment (ZeroAvia)

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): I welcome the news that the green aircraft engine developer ZeroAvia will establish a major manufacturing base in Scotland, creating 350 jobs. What assessment has the Scottish Government made of the economic impact of that investment? Can the First Minister say more about the steps that the Scottish Government is taking to attract such inward investment throughout Scotland?

The First Minister (John Swinney): Mr Adam raises a particular case that is directly relevant to the answers that I gave earlier to Russell Findlay: the case of ZeroAvia, which has decided to locate its manufacturing facility for hydrogen fuel cell technology for air travel at the advanced manufacturing innovation district in Inchinnan. As a consequence of that, up to 350 high-skilled, high-value jobs will be created in low-carbon technologies. That has been made possible by investment from not only ZeroAvia but the United

Kingdom Government's National Wealth Fund, the Scottish National Investment Bank, which acts on our behalf, and Scottish Enterprise.

That is a classic example of how, by working with the private sector, the Government can attract investment. The Deputy First Minister is leading that work within Government to ensure that we attract investment into Scotland and that we create economic opportunity from the journey to net zero. That is the point that I made to Mr Findlay in my earlier answer and I am delighted that there will be a positive economic impact in Mr Adam's Paisley constituency and in the constituency of my colleague Natalie Don-Innes.

Stagecoach Services (Dumfries and Galloway)

Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con): Having milked the public purse for years while the going was good, Stagecoach has now decided to throw Dumfries and Galloway under the bus. There are reports that the company is planning to exit the region altogether, abandon more than a hundred members of staff, close depots in Dumfries and Stranraer and even hand back school transport contracts. That presents a huge challenge across a large rural local authority, and constituents are seeking urgent reassurance that they will still be able to get to work, school and hospital appointments. Will the First Minister commit the Government and its agencies to working with Dumfries and Galloway Council to ensure that bus services do not collapse and to explore alternative options that will retain current drivers and staff?

The First Minister (John Swinney): As I understand it, the issue is part of a live procurement exercise that is being led by Dumfries and Galloway Council. The Scottish Government has no involvement in that decision-making process, but I am assured that local authority officers are working through the options as part of that procurement process.

I understand the point that Mr Mundell puts to me about the importance of sustaining community travel services in Dumfries and Galloway. That will be challenging enough for members of the public without any diminution of those services. I will ask my officials to look at the situation to see whether there is any scope for the Government to assist in reaching an agreement. I have been advised that there is a live council procurement exercise, but I will take away Mr Mundell's point and consider whether the Government can assist in any way.

Stagecoach Services (Dumfries and Galloway)

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): Does the First Minister accept that, given the scale of the services that Stagecoach provides in a region where the company has a near monopoly on school transport and on lifeline subsidised

services, we must urgently look at alternatives? We cannot face a situation in which kids might not be able to get to school by bus in August because of actions as part of the current negotiation, with lifeline services taken away. The situation is an example of bus networks in this country being broken. The big companies have a monopoly, and communities miss out most when they walk away.

The First Minister: I accept Mr Smyth's final point, hence the importance of Dumfries and Galloway Council acting in a fashion that enables continuity of services.

Opportunities for bus services to be organised in a different way have been provided in legislation that the Government has enacted. I accept that the timescale that Mr Smyth and Mr Mundell have put to me means that there is an urgent need for the issue to be resolved. I give Mr Smyth the assurance that I gave to Mr Mundell, which is that the Cabinet Secretary for Transport will look at the case to see whether there is anything that the Government can do to help to resolve matters and ensure continuity of services. That is a legitimate expectation from Mr Smyth.

Ukraine (Trade and Investment Links)

Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): How will the memorandum of understanding between the Scottish Government and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, which commits our Government and that of Ukraine to strengthening trade and investment links, allow Scotland to do its part in supporting Ukraine to rebuild its country in the face of Russia's illegal war? Will the First Minister make a commitment to the Parliament, and to the country, that his Government will keep under active review the ways in which Scotland can support the future of Ukraine and, by extension, the peace and stability of Europe?

The First Minister (John Swinney): On Tuesday evening, along with Richard Lochhead, the Minister for Business, I had the enormous pleasure of meeting a delegation of mayors from Ukraine who had come to Scotland to sign a trade agreement and to encourage collaboration. On Wednesday, the agreement was signed by the Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture, Angus Robertson, on behalf of the Scottish Government. That dialogue has been encouraged and enabled by the work of the Parliament's cross-party group on Ukraine, of which Mr Beattie is the convener. I am grateful to that group for its support.

The agreement is one example of how we can establish further co-operation and collaboration with Ukraine as it tries to recover from an illegal invasion. It is also an opportunity for me to indicate our resolute support for Ukraine's people. On

Friday, I was in London, where I met the Prime Minister. Of all the things that he said to me and the leaders of other devolved Governments that day, I cannot compliment enough his resolution in support of Ukraine. I applaud the Prime Minister for his resolute support. He speaks on behalf of the Scottish Parliament when he highlights the importance of our standing up to Russian aggression, protecting Ukraine and securing its future. We will stand steadfast with the people of Ukraine in that regard.

Hawick Fire Station

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): Due to unprecedented Scottish National Party cuts, the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service has brought forward plans to scrap 24/7 fire cover at Hawick fire station, which will leave nearby towns and communities at risk. Earlier this month, I met local firefighters who told me how the cuts will pose a direct threat to them and to residents across the Borders. Will the First Minister join my campaign to save Hawick fire station? Given the very real danger that the plans would pose to my constituents, I feel that it is imperative that he should get behind that campaign.

The First Minister (John Swinney): The Scottish Fire and Rescue Service intends to undertake a consultation on various aspects of service redesign, which it will conduct through engagement. Twenty-three service delivery review options are being considered as part of a full public consultation that will commence at the end of June 2025. Rachael Hamilton's points can be considered as part of that consultation. It is important that the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service adopts a sustainable approach to fire and rescue cover, which will vary around the country based on the number of incidents and the level of risk in particular localities. The SFRS will carry out the consultation in a professional manner.

On the financial aspects, the Government has increased the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service's budget for this financial year by £18.1 million. Indeed, its budget has increased by £97 million since 2017-18. Therefore, the Government has been investing in the service, but, from time to time, the SFRS needs to explore how its resources can be deployed properly. It will do that in a professional way while protecting public safety.

Child Poverty (United Kingdom Government Strategy)

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): Save the Children has warned that delay in the UK Government's publishing its child poverty strategy means that

"20,000 more children will be dragged into poverty."

Does the First Minister share my concern that, yet again, Westminster's inaction is getting in the way of the Scottish Government's work to eradicate child poverty in South Scotland and across the rest of our country?

The First Minister (John Swinney): It is important that all Governments across the UK take action to eradicate child poverty, which is the focus of my Government. We have put in place the Scottish child payment, which will increase this year. We have also taken the decision to abolish the two-child limit, which is an important step in lifting children out of poverty. When I met the Prime Minister on Friday, my plea to him was that the UK Government should act in a way that assists us in our endeavour to eradicate such poverty.

I am concerned that the steps that are being taken on welfare reform will throw more children into poverty. I hope that the UK Government takes a different course of action, because we are committed to eradicating child poverty, and it would be helpful—after all the years of austerity and the damage that has been done by the Conservatives—if the Labour Government could help us in our work to eradicate child poverty.

Mental Health Services (Police Scotland)

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): It has been reported that Police Scotland receives approximately 20,000 calls per month relating to mental health issues. The impact of the demand on the service is significant, with a lack of suitably trained psychologists and a lack of fast-tracking for individuals who have the ability to be looked after, and those individuals should not be held in police custody suites. What action is the Scottish Government taking to urgently support police officers during this mental health crisis?

The First Minister (John Swinney): We are taking a number of steps to expand capacity in mental health services. For example, we have exceeded our commitment to fund more than 800 additional mental health workers in various locations, including accident and emergency departments, general practitioner practices and other public sector facilities.

We are also supporting the expansion of community-based support. Since 2020, we have invested more than £145 million in community ventures to support young people. In addition, nearly 83,000 children, young people and their family members accessed community-based mental health support between July 2023 and March 2024. That indicates that we are building capacity to ensure that the mental health needs of

the population are effectively addressed in community settings around the country.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes First Minister's question time. There will be a short suspension to allow those leaving the chamber and the gallery to do so.

12:46

Meeting suspended.

12:50

On resuming—

Bosnian Genocide in Srebrenica (30th Anniversary)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-17419, in the name of Michelle Thomson, on 30 years on from the Bosnian genocide in Srebrenica. The debate will be concluded without any question being put. I invite members who wish to participate to press their request-to-speak buttons.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament recognises the 30th anniversary of the Bosnian genocide in Srebrenica in which 8,372 innocent civilians were murdered by Bosnian Serb forces; remembers the victims who suffered violence, torture and brutality in what it believes to be the single largest act of ethnic cleansing in Europe since the Second World War; understands that 54 individuals have been prosecuted to date for their role in the massacre but considers that many more were involved in creating the culture and environment, which led to the genocide in Srebrenica, through their use of hate speech, oppression, discrimination and propaganda against the Bosnian Muslim population; praises the work of Mothers of Srebrenica, which, it understands, engaged in protests and other acts of public defiance to demand that the mass graves be found and the victims identified; believes that, to date, more than 7,000 of the reported missing from Srebrenica have been accounted for and buried in marked graves; commends the work of Beyond Srebrenica, whose efforts through its programme, Lessons of Srebrenica, challenge hate and intolerance using the lessons learned from the 1995 Srebrenica genocide, ensuring that they are better understood and prevented in the future; considers that genocide, recognised as an international crime usually carried out during war, is complex to stop and notes the belief that all world leaders must pledge to eradicate it, but that individuals can challenge hate and intolerance, which it considers are the root causes of many conflicts, and reflects on the atrocities of the Srebrenica genocide 30 years on.

12:50

Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): I am honoured to speak to my motion on 30 years on from the Bosnian genocide in Srebrenica. In the troubled world of today, it is important to reflect, and I am indebted to the work of the charity Beyond Srebrenica and its programme lessons from Srebrenica. I thank David Hamilton, Sabina Kadić-Mackenzie and all others involved in the charity for the chance to participate in its delegate programme, and I thank the Scottish Government for its sponsorship.

I was rereading a published document from the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, and it is telling how it, in quite a matter-of-fact way, described the significance of the events in Srebrenica in July 1995. It states:

"The massacre that occurred in Srebrenica in July 1995 was the single worst atrocity committed in the former Yugoslavia during the wars of the 1990s and the worst massacre that occurred in Europe since the months after World War II."

Some of the evidence that was presented in subsequent court cases was harrowing. In June 2005, during cross-examination of a witness in the case against Slobodan Milošević, the court viewed rare video footage showing a Serbian paramilitary unit, calling itself the Scorpions, execute a small group of Bosnian Muslim men and teenage boys who were captured after the fall of Srebrenica in 1995. The images of Serbian soldiers tormenting and then shooting the Bosnian Muslim prisoners, whose hands were tied behind their backs and who offered no resistance before being shot, was to prove a telling piece of evidence.

The trial examined evidence of mass executions at a total of nine sites from 13 to 17 July 1995. Dozens of burial sites were created for the mass disposal of bodies, and the evidence showed it to be a lie that those killed were combatants. It was also not a result of some spontaneous revenge killings—far from it. It was a premeditated and planned mass killing operation of men and boys. It was a genocide.

Soldiers were mobilised to guard the prisoners, move them to execution sites and shoot them. Thousands of rounds of ammunition to shoot the prisoners were supplied. A great many vehicles were commandeered to move the prisoners, and bulldozers and excavators were commissioned to dig their graves. The killings were done in a grotesque fashion. One of the rare survivors recounted to the court:

"When they opened fire, I threw myself on the ground ... And one man fell on my head. I think that he was killed on the spot. And I could feel the hot blood pouring over me ... I could hear one man crying for help. He was begging them to kill him. And they simply said, 'Let him suffer. We will kill him later.'"

This was a case of both genocide and androicide—the systematic killing of males because of their sex as part of a deliberate campaign to eliminate a specific religious and ethnic group. It was a horrific exercise in ethnic cleansing. Besides the thousands of men and boys killed, tens of thousands of women and children were uprooted and removed from the area.

As my motion states,

"54 individuals have been prosecuted to date for their role in the massacre but ... many more were involved in creating the culture and environment, which led to the genocide in Srebrenica, through their use of hate speech, oppression, discrimination and propaganda against the Bosnian Muslim population".

I should have added "only" before the number 54. The international community failed in 1995. Too

many, including the blue helmets of the United Nations, looked the other way.

I would like to offer a personal perspective, after having been invited to visit Srebrenica by the charity last year. It was one of the best organised trips that I have ever been on, and it gave a proper sense of what happened and the extent to which events still rest heavily on those who remain—and rightly so.

Women are always casualties in war, too, and this war was no different. While visiting the cemetery where more than 6,000 bodies have now been officially buried, we spoke with Mejra Djogaz, who lost her husband and three sons in the conflict. Quoted in an article by my fellow delegate Eddie Barnes, she said:

"I would never have returned to Srebrenica if one of my children was alive but since they are all dead then this is the only place I can be near to them".

We visited the charity the Association of Women Victims of War, which gives voice to many women who were raped during the conflict. It not only collects their stories but attempts to bring about prosecutions of the perpetrators—men who move openly still in Serbian society today. We drove past a warehouse in Kravica, one of the places where more than 1,370 men were shot. The bullet holes have been plastered over, and a wall has been built around it that stops the mothers and wives from laying flowers in homage to their loved ones.

Bosnian politics have long been notoriously complex, and they remain so to this day. Despite promises made, accession to the European Union feels no closer for many of the successor states of Yugoslavia, and the lack of progress continues to lead to irritation and a sense of being let down across the entire region. The shift away from a European focus in the new American foreign policy can only embolden other actors in the region, and I fear that we feel further away than we have ever been from acknowledging what happened and taking the steps that are required to allow for healing and moving forward.

The work of the International Commission on Missing Persons continues. It is still finding remains of the men who were killed, sometimes in multiple locations, as the bodies were buried, lifted and buried again—sometimes multiple times.

I give the final words to Mejra. Speaking to Eddie Barnes, she said:

"Why do we do this? We are fighting for justice and truth to be heard. Our fight is for the truth and justice for our beloved ones who were killed."

Her fight for truth and justice is a fight for us all.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Ms Thomson. We move to the open debate.

12:58

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): I thank Michelle Thomson for her motion and for bringing this debate to the chamber. I also congratulate her—if that is the right word—on a speech that brought home again to all of us the horrors, the harrowing detail and the memories of what occurred 30 years ago in Srebrenica, because that was indeed an act of horror: 8,372 Bosniak men and boys were murdered in cold blood.

Amid that massacre—that genocide—another crime was committed, which although it was less visible, was no less devastating. That was the mass, systematic rape of Bosniak women and girls. Sexual violence was not incidental to the conflict; it was used deliberately as a tool of ethnic cleansing, humiliation and destruction. Tens of thousands of women were subjected to unspeakable abuse, and many carry that trauma today, largely in silence.

That is why the preventing sexual violence in conflict initiative—PSVI—matters. That United Kingdom-led initiative exists because of the failure to prevent atrocities from being committed, including those in Bosnia, and the lack of prosecutions when they are. It seeks to end the culture of impunity around conflict-related sexual violence and to place survivors at the heart of justice and peacekeeping.

Srebrenica is a stark reminder of what happens when hate is left unchecked and when international resolve falters. Thirty years on, fewer than 1 per cent of sexual violence cases in Bosnia have led to convictions. That failure of justice is not just a historical shame; it is a continuing injustice. We commend the work of the Mothers of Srebrenica and Beyond Srebrenica for keeping the truth alive. However, we must do more. If we are to truly honour the victims, we must confront the on-going use of sexual violence in conflicts today, from Africa to the middle east, and ensure that PSVI has the political backing and resources to make a difference.

Remembrance alone is not enough. Justice must be pursued. Survivors must be supported, not with pity, but with purpose, and we must challenge the hatred that seeds such atrocities in Bosnia, Europe and wherever it may surface, because the truth that we must deal with is that, for most of us in the chamber, this is an event that happened in our lifetimes when the vow of a previous generation had been that such events would never occur in Europe again. Let this Parliament stand as one in saying never again, not in words alone, but in action.

13:01

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): I thank my colleague Michelle Thomson for bringing this vitally important motion before the Parliament.

The 30th anniversary of the genocide in Srebrenica is not only a time to mourn the 8,372 lives lost; it is a time to reflect on the responsibilities that we carry as parliamentarians, as educators and as human beings. We say never again, but that promise must live in action, not just in memory, because genocide does not begin with weapons; it begins with words, dehumanisation, division and the slow erosion of empathy.

It is in our schools, our homes and our institutions that we must build the resilience to resist that, which is why I am proud to mention the young people and teachers at Banff academy in my constituency. This year, three of its religious, moral and philosophical studies pupils received national recognition in the Beyond Srebrenica national schools competition for their powerful and compassionate writing about the genocide.

Finlay in secondary 4 was named the overall senior phase winner, and he will soon travel to Bosnia on a fully funded visit, including a trip to the Srebrenica memorial centre. Kellan and Nikolas, both in S3, were also highly commended. All three pupils and the staff who supported them are here in the Parliament today, and I am delighted to welcome them, along with other Banff academy pupils, who are here to celebrate and support one another's achievements.

Earlier this year, Banff academy also took part in a powerful international art project called "Banff to Bethlehem", working with a Palestinian artist to explore themes of resilience and solidarity. The Banff academy pupils' artwork was actually projected on to the separation wall in the West Bank. That is essential education with critical engagement, teaching not just what it means to care but what it means to act.

In a year that marks both 80 years since victory in Europe day and 30 years since the horror of Srebrenica, education such as this could not be more vital. Schools do more than teach lessons; they ensure that fostering emotional intelligence, social responsibility and a deep understanding of justice is a part of our education system. After all, is that not the most important education that we could give our children?

We have a moral duty not to look away from what has happened and is happening in the world. The genocide in Srebrenica happened in plain sight, in a United Nations-declared safe zone, and it was made possible by years of hate speech, scapegoating and propaganda. The Mothers of Srebrenica, who have fought tirelessly for justice

and recognition, show us the enduring cost of silence and the strength of truth. I commend the work of Remembering Srebrenica and Beyond Srebrenica for preserving the truth and passing it on to future generations. Their efforts ensure that remembrance is not a relic of the past, but a living force that challenges hate wherever it surfaces.

Let us be clear: when we see the rise of far-right rhetoric in the United Kingdom and witness ongoing atrocities around the world, including in Palestine, we must not lose our moral clarity. We do not meet hate with hedging, but with courage and conscience.

True leadership is not found in dog whistles or division but in the values that we pass on to our children, in the stories that we choose to tell and in the communities that we choose to stand with. Today, as we honour those who died in Srebrenica, we must also commit ourselves to the living—to standing up for truth, dignity and justice. The greatest lesson to learn is that we must ensure that “Never again” is not just a phrase that we say but a promise that we keep.

13:05

Paul O’Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): I add my thanks to Michelle Thomson for lodging the motion and opening the debate; I recognise the way that we have engaged across parties in the chamber to ensure that the debate could take place today. I also pay tribute to the excellent work of Beyond Srebrenica Scotland and to its chair, Sabina Kadić-Mackenzie, for all her efforts in ensuring that we protect the memory of Srebrenica and educate people about what happened there 30 years ago.

To that end, I urge colleagues to join the events in Parliament today. There will be a drop-in in the Fleming room, where some of the young people whom Karen Adam referenced will talk to members, and a photograph will be taken outside at quarter past 2. I hope that colleagues will be able to join us in those endeavours.

Like Michelle Thomson, I was honoured to take part in the delegation to Bosnia and Herzegovina in March, along with minister Siobhian Brown and many others from across public life in Scotland. It was one of the most profound things that I have done as an MSP and, as Michelle Thomson referenced, a great opportunity to understand and encounter people who lived through those horrendous experiences 30 years ago.

When I was in that delegation, each evening I tried to write something to capture my thoughts and experiences. In the speaking time that I have, I will read to colleagues one of the reflections that I wrote on the day that we came back from Srebrenica:

The sun is slowly dipping below the hill. There has been some warmth today and all around are hints of spring, but as evening falls there is a chill that seems to reach down to us from the mountains. Nzad has just finished speaking to us. He is framed by row upon row of white gravestones. He survived a mass execution as a child and walked with bullet wounds to his head and stomach for days to reach safety. He is a softly spoken man. He speaks calmly and generously answers our questions. He speaks about his daughters, who just yesterday played with Bosnian Serb girls in the local volleyball team.

Despite the horrors done to him and to those he loved, he wants a better future for his children. A silent reverence lingers before we rise to walk one last time in the fading light around the thousands of graves, touching the names etched into the grey stone on the Srebrenica genocide memorial—each a son, a father, a brother, a husband.

There is something incomprehensible here—something that makes me want to stay longer, to try to understand, to cry out, to do something, although nothing seems to meet the enormity. The journey here reminded us of the fragility of the peace agreement and the prevalence of denial of the genocide in the Republika Srpska. In each service station and each town, there would be people who had turned on their neighbours, people who had stayed silent in the face of what was happening, and people who even carried out those unspeakable acts. They are walking these roads, sipping coffee, watching our bus pass.

We visited the memorial centre at the battery factory, which was the Dutch UN base at Potocari, and we retraced the footsteps of those days in July 1995. We were all rendered speechless by video footage of what happened after the UN allowed the Bosnian Serb forces to separate boys and men from women and girls. Promises of safe passage to free Bosnian territory were a lie.

In the video, filmed by their executioners, we watched six men shot dead. The two youngest were spared until they had dragged the four bodies of their comrades into a shallow grave. There are no words. We all reach out to each other without speaking as we climb the stairs to meet the directors of the centre.

Before we left, we met Mother Fadala. She speaks to us at her shop, selling flowers, books and memorial items. Like all the mothers, she lost everything. The shop is her defiance, her reason to go on. The authorities of the Republika Srpska do not want her here, but this unassuming, smiling small lady in her 80s is a rock, unmovable, strong. She tells us that soon she will travel to the United Nations in New York to call for the international community not to forget and to do more. This is

what the mothers do. They stand because others cannot.

In the darkness of our journey back to Sarajevo, there is much to process. I think of the sun setting on those rows and rows of white stones and the words that are written in the books held in common by the Abrahamic faith. What have you done? Listen—your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground.

13:10

The Minister for Victims and Community Safety (Siobhian Brown): First, I express my gratitude to Michelle Thomson for sponsoring today's motion. I also sincerely thank everyone who has kindly taken this opportunity to commemorate the 30th anniversary of the Srebrenica genocide, which will take place on 11 July, and white armband day. I echo the heartfelt words that have been offered by my fellow members in remembrance and recognition of the victims across Bosnia and Herzegovina, just as I did earlier this year when we came together to commemorate the 80th anniversary of the Holocaust. I also give a warm welcome to those in the gallery, including the young people and their teachers from the lessons of Srebrenica schools competition. I can also see Sabina Kadić-Mackenzie, who graciously led me and others on a delegation to Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Barry Fisher, the secretary for Beyond Srebrenica.

Members will be aware that Paul O'Kane and Beyond Srebrenica have organised a drop-in session this afternoon to raise awareness of white armband day, and I encourage members to attend if they can. There will also be a national commemoration of the Srebrenica genocide in Glasgow on 10 July. I hope to see members at those important events.

I thank members for their very powerful contributions this afternoon. I think that those of us who had the honour and the privilege to go on the delegation to Bosnia will all agree that it was totally life-changing. It definitely was for me.

White armband day, which will be commemorated on Saturday 31 May, provides an opportunity to recognise and honour the victims of the atrocities in Prijedor and the surrounding areas. It represents the enforcement of a decree that was issued on the local radio that compelled non-Serb citizens to wear a white armband, segregating them simply for who they were.

At the UN's International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, witnesses from Prijedor shared that

"life was very hard. Our movements were restricted. If you went to buy anything in a shop, you had to wear white

armbands. On the windows of our houses and apartments, we had to hang out white flags."

That slow process of dehumanisation singled out many non-Serb citizens and set in motion heinous campaigns of brutality, violence and ethnic cleansing. Violence in the region continued to escalate, including through concentration camps in the north-west, which were discovered and shared to a shocked world by journalists Ed Vulliamy and Penny Marshall in the early 1990s. In 1997, Ed Vulliamy described a camp in Omarska as a

"dark inferno of mutilation, starvation, torture and murder."

Prijedor is the site of one of the largest mass graves in Bosnia, where the bones of several hundreds of people were unearthed. Thirty years later, across Bosnia, many mothers and wives have still not been reunited with the remains of their loved ones.

In March, I had the privilege of joining a delegation to Bosnia and Herzegovina with the charity Beyond Srebrenica. The delegation underlined the importance of standing up to hatred, of understanding and challenging the impact that prejudice can have, and of building a cohesive and resilient society. I travelled to Srebrenica and visited the cemetery in Potocari, which is the site of the graves of more than 8,000 men and boys.

There, we heard from survivors Nedžad Avdić and Almasa Salihović, who shared the terror, destruction and violence that they had endured. As they told their experiences, it was like watching them relive every moment of terror that they had endured. It was a truly humbling experience. Despite the sheer inhumanity that they described, they and many others show remarkable resilience and commitment by returning to Srebrenica to preserve those memories and to challenge and confront those who deny them.

In the memorial centre, we saw hard-hitting real-life footage of young men—some of whom I would call boys, as they were the age of my son—who had been brutally beaten and were being carted on a truck like animals, before being lined up and shot. That is the footage that Michelle Thomson referred to as being used in the court case and that Paul O'Kane mentioned in his speech, too.

We saw shoes and other belongings that were left behind as people desperately attempted to flee to Tuzla, which was a journey that later became known as the death march.

Although the war is over, many of its scars remain. In 1984, Sarajevo hosted the winter Olympic games and, as part of the delegation's guided tour, we visited the site of the old bobsleigh track that was used during the games. On our descent down to Sarajevo city, we saw built-up areas in which we were told snipers had been

positioned. Although that was 30 years ago, the evidence of the war is still engrained in Sarajevo's everyday life. All around Sarajevo, the streets are damaged by historical artillery and bullet marks, which are painted red in remembrance of those who lost their lives.

We heard reflections from ordinary people on the extraordinary methods that they use to protect themselves and their families, even to this day, 30 years later.

Although some wounds deepen with time, there are also remarkable illustrations of strength, resilience and hope. We were fortunate to be led by our guides Suvad and Sabina, who shared their raw personal experiences of the historical events with bravery and grace.

On our delegation, we visited many organisations. We had the honour of meeting the tour de force that is Bakhira Hasečić, who established the Association of Women Victims of War, which is a charity that brings together victims of sexual assault and holds perpetrators to account. We met representatives of Žene za Žene, or Women for Women, which was founded in Bosnia to help women who have been displaced by war. We met representatives of the International Commission on Missing Persons, which conducts DNA identifications and challenges denial as it continues, 30 years later, to find the remains of the 8,000 boys and men so that they can be buried by their families.

There was also a profound visit to the War Childhood Museum, which archives artefacts belonging to young children, encouraging us to confront truths from the past while instilling a sense of hope for a peaceful future.

We are indebted to Beyond Srebrenica for the power of work that it does across Scotland to educate about and commemorate the genocide. The delegation was an incredibly profound, moving and confronting experience that challenged us all to bring home what we had seen and experienced.

We must lead by example and remain ever vigilant. Days such as white armband day are crucial to ensuring that the grave consequences of the past are never forgotten and never repeated.

We are committed to combating all forms of hatred and prejudice, including through the delivery of our ambitious hate crime strategy. Preventative work that builds strong, respectful and cohesive communities can prevent the narratives that foster prejudice from taking hold. The First Minister's gathering on strengthening and protecting democracy brought key members of our society together to agree a common approach to asserting the values of our country

and to creating a society in which everyone can flourish.

Let us challenge anyone who would deny our values, and let us work co-operatively to stand against division. The Scottish Government will continue to do so.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate.

13:19

Meeting suspended.

14:30

On resuming—

Portfolio Question Time

Social Justice

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): Good afternoon, colleagues. The first item of business this afternoon is portfolio question time. On this occasion, the portfolio is social justice. I make the usual request that members who wish to ask a supplementary press their request-to-speak buttons during the relevant question.

Question 1 has not been lodged.

Transgender People (Support)

2. Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): To ask the Scottish Government what action it will take to support transgender people following the recent Supreme Court ruling, in light of reported concerns from transgender people, and their friends, family and allies that it undermines the rights and risks the personal safety of transgender individuals. (S6O-04729)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): Following the Supreme Court judgment, I met our LGBTQI+ stakeholders to discuss the concerns of the transgender community. The Scottish Government will continue to engage with LGBTQI+ stakeholders while the Equality and Human Rights Commission consults on its updated code of practice.

The Scottish ministers have consistently called for everyone who is engaged in the debate to be respectful and mindful of their tone. We have also repeatedly called for the consultation on the code of practice to be fully inclusive, and we have highlighted that to the EHRC.

Mark Ruskell: I thank the cabinet secretary for that sympathetic response.

The real issue here is the fact that the increasing levels of violence and discrimination that trans people face are destroying their dignity. Which toilets people use is an utter red herring. We should focus on the root causes of the real violence and structural oppression that women and trans people face.

How will the Scottish Government engage further with the EHRC consultation on the final guidance to ensure that it does not further infringe on trans people's dignity and rights, which they have successfully had for decades?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Mark Ruskell again rightly alerts the Parliament to the continuing

violence, discrimination and abuse that members of the LGBTQI+ community—especially members of the transgender community—face, given recent events.

As I said in my initial answer, we have called for the code of practice consultation to be fully inclusive. In addition, the Government will continue to engage with the EHRC at official and ministerial levels, and we encourage everyone who has an interest in the consultation to engage with that process and ask the EHRC to support them in the manner that we would all expect.

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): Will the minister please expand on how the Scottish Government will continue to work with a range of third sector organisations to ensure that the voices of people with lived experience can help to improve outcomes for LGBTQI+ communities across Scotland?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: In 2025-26, we are providing funding of more than £1.1 million to organisations that promote LGBTQI+ equality in Scotland, which are working to improve the lives of the communities and to increase their access to services. The work that is undertaken by the organisations that receive that funding includes policy development, training, research and engagement with the LGBTQI+ community.

Ash Regan (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba): The fear and toxicity that have been referred to are, of course, fuelled by hyperbolic assertions by those advocacy groups, which are amplified by people in positions of influence.

In the For Women Scotland case, the Supreme Court brought vital clarity: sex in law is not changed by self-identification or certification. Trans-identifying people deserve dignity and honesty, but women and girls deserve safety. What support is available for those who faced coercion, risk and harm under gender self-identification, and those whose health, wellbeing and livelihoods have suffered simply for defending the lawful human rights to sex-based protections for women and girls?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: As I said in my original remarks, we have consistently called for everyone who is engaged in the debate to be respectful and mindful of their tone and of the implications if they choose to enter the debate in a disrespectful manner. That goes for absolutely everybody who is involved in the debate.

It is important, especially on sensitive matters, that we engage in debate respectfully and that we are mindful of the consequences of our tone and our conduct, both in the chamber and outwith it.

Reinforced Autoclaved Aerated Concrete (Assistance for Homeowners)

3. Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what assistance it plans to provide to homeowners affected by reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete in their properties, in light of recent reports that offers from local authorities may result in unaffordable mortgage costs. (S6O-04730)

The Minister for Housing (Paul McLennan): I recognise that it is a very difficult time for households that are affected by RAAC. Homeowners are generally responsible for maintenance costs. As a building and maintenance issue, it is the responsibility of building owners, including local authorities, to maintain their properties. Where a council is undertaking a voluntary acquisition, it is for the council and the homeowner to agree the terms of the offer.

Officials have been in touch with UK Finance to understand the support that homeowners can expect to receive from their mortgage lenders. UK Finance has informed us that any homeowners who are worried about their mortgage or making their payments as a result of RAAC issues should get in touch with their lender in the first instance.

Alexander Stewart: The Scottish RAAC campaign group reports that families are living in homes that are literally falling apart. That has left people facing homelessness, rising debt and mental health struggles, as their homes become worthless. The Scottish Government opts to trade blame with Westminster. Will the Scottish Government now commit to providing financial assistance to homeowners who are left in an horrendous situation?

Paul McLennan: It is important to realise that when RAAC is found in a property, it depends on how extreme the situation is. I have been engaging with Aberdeen Council, Dundee Council and homeowners. Every case is different. We will continue to engage with local authorities and push the UK Government for financial assistance.

Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): The previous United Kingdom Government promised to spend what it takes to remediate RAAC, but of course no funding was made available. What engagement has the minister had with the current UK Government on any plans to provide RAAC funding across the UK?

Paul McLennan: I have engaged with the UK Government consistently for support in addressing the issue of RAAC, including through making available new capital funds to allow any action that may be required. I will continue to press the UK Government to provide funding. So far, it has

refused, and the latest response from the UK Government has made it clear that it does not intend to provide any funding. I will write to the UK Chancellor of the Exchequer ahead of the spending review to ask the UK Government to reconsider its position and make available a national fund, as RAAC is a UK-wide issue.

Child Disability Payment (Communication with Applicants)

4. Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what work Social Security Scotland is undertaking to improve its communication with applicants for child disability payment. (S6O-04731)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): Social Security Scotland is committed to improving communications with child disability payment applicants. Applicants are asked to share their communication needs or preferences in application forms. Those are recorded and can be updated at any time. People can request letters in different languages and accessible formats, including Braille, easy read and large print. Email and text updates were introduced in 2024 to keep child disability payment applicants informed at key application stages. Social Security Scotland seeks feedback from stakeholders and clients to ensure that it communicates in a way that meets people's needs with dignity, fairness and respect.

Paul Sweeney: If I may provide some feedback, when Social Security Scotland was first established, we were promised that Scotland would be getting a benefits system that had the principles of dignity, fairness and respect at its core, yet I am regularly having to support constituents who, once they make their application for a child disability payment, get zero communications from Social Security Scotland for months on end, only getting feedback after the intervention of my office. That is unacceptable.

With the median average processing time for child disability payment increasing from 73 working days to 79 working days over the past quarter, that lack of communication is increasingly distressing for constituents forced to wait and wonder whether their application has been successful. There is no dignity in that approach, so does the cabinet secretary agree that that needs to change and that Social Security Scotland must improve both its processing times and its proactive communication with applicants for child disability payment?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: As I have mentioned in the chamber on a number of occasions, we take the processing times for child disability payment and adult disability payment very seriously. A great deal of work has been undertaken to ensure

that we are listening and learning, as the service develops. As I said in my original answer, some of the developments around that can include keeping people updated on their application, but we are also doing a great deal of work to ensure that the application forms and supporting information are collated in a way that allows the agency to make a decision as quickly as possible.

I assure the member that I take the issue very seriously and am in close contact with the agency, particularly on child disability payment. However, if he has particular concerns over constituency cases, I would be happy to look at them, should he wish me to do so.

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): I apologise for my late arrival in the chamber, Presiding Officer.

I very much welcome the child disability payment and the fact that, since its launch, it has provided more than £1.1 billion in support to eligible children and young people. Will the cabinet secretary speak to how the Scottish Government will continue to support our most vulnerable young people? Can she reaffirm this Government's commitment to always providing welfare support to those who need it?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: A very important part of the work that the Government will always do—not just in social security, although social security plays an important part in this—is protecting some of the most vulnerable people in our society through the devolved benefits. That includes low-income families; carers, including young carers; and disabled people. Many of the benefits, including the young carer grant, the job start payment and the Scottish child payment, are only available in Scotland, which is because of our commitment. That is an important part of our investment in the people of Scotland, which recognises social security as a human right.

Equality and Human Rights Commission (Meetings)

5. Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government when it will meet with the Equality and Human Rights Commission regarding its recently published consultation on updating the code of practice for services, public functions and associations, following the recent Supreme Court ruling. (S6O-04732)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care and I were due to meet the Equality and Human Rights Commission on 24 April. However, that meeting was, unfortunately, cancelled by the EHRC. Scottish Government officials met the EHRC on 30

April, and it was agreed at that meeting that there would be further engagement when the consultation had been published. We are currently scheduling a ministerial meeting with the EHRC to discuss the consultation that is now open.

Rachael Hamilton: The consultation document says that the EHRC has updated the definition of sex throughout the code of practice to

“Legal sex is the sex that was recorded at your birth.”

If the cabinet secretary is clear about that definition, when will the Scottish Government implement the updated EHRC definition of sex when delivering guidance on the provision of single-sex spaces in public institutions such as schools, hospitals and prisons?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: As I have mentioned in the chamber previously, the Government has already begun its work to ensure implementation of the Supreme Court judgment. I have talked previously about the important work that is being undertaken by the short-life working group that I asked the permanent secretary to stand up. That will ensure that the matter is looked at right across the Government in a consistent manner, and that work has already begun.

Scottish Child Payment (Impact on Food Poverty)

6. Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what research has been undertaken into any impact of the Scottish child payment on food poverty. (S6O-04733)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): Research that the Fraser of Allander Institute published in May 2024 suggests that the Scottish child payment has led to statistically significant decreases in food bank use by single-parent households with children under five and households with children aged five to 16 without younger children. Our evaluation of the Scottish child payment includes testimony from recipients that, before the payment, they relied on food parcels, needed to use food banks or skipped meals to ensure that their children would eat. Later this year, we will publish a further evaluation of the five family payments, which will cover impacts on food bank use.

Christine Grahame: A family with two children aged under 16 that is able to access the Scottish child payment will receive £54.30 a week. That makes a big difference. I advise the cabinet secretary—corroborating what she has already said—that, during my recent visit to Peeblesshire Foodbank, I was told that it has had fewer calls for its resources as a direct result of the Scottish child payment.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I thank Christine Grahame for providing that feedback. It is good to see the impact that the Scottish child payment is having in her community and, indeed, right across Scotland. As demonstrated by the Trussell Trust's report that was published last week, food bank use in Scotland has decreased—there was a 10 per cent drop in the number of parcels that were distributed by Trussell food banks in Scotland between 1 April 2024 and 31 March 2025. That is an important aspect that, once again, demonstrates the impact of the Scottish child payment.

However, I know that there is more to do, which is exactly why we will continue our work to mitigate the two-child cap, given the United Kingdom Government's decision not to do so.

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): The cabinet secretary knows that we had very extensive engagement on the question of child poverty at this morning's meeting of the Social Justice and Social Security Committee. One thing that came out of the meeting was the fact that there needs to be much greater use of data to ascertain the effectiveness of policy. Will the cabinet secretary provide assurance that there will be greater co-operation between the Scottish Government and local authorities to ensure that we get the right data?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Liz Smith's question alludes to the committee's discussion about the importance of data sharing and of using data at local authority, Scottish Government and, indeed, UK Government levels to ensure that we deliver the best services and provide support for people. I once again give Liz Smith reassurance that I think that data can play an important part in evaluating the impact of a policy, as we have discussed. It can also play an important part in ensuring that policies genuinely deliver for people by allowing us to target our support. For example, we can use data to know who is best placed to be eligible for the Scottish child payment or the other payments that are available through Social Security Scotland.

Housing Emergency

7. Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on what actions it is taking to end the housing emergency. (S6O-04734)

The Minister for Housing (Paul McLennan): The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice made a statement to the Parliament on the issue on 22 May. Since the national housing emergency was declared, we have been working at pace to implement changes to address the current position and attend to the longer-term pressures. Actions include increasing the budget for the affordable

housing supply programme to £768 million, bringing 1,000 homes back into use and committing £100 million for the mid-market rental sector. The programme for government reaffirmed the commitment to deliver 110,000 affordable homes by 2032.

Graham Simpson: I thank the minister for that answer, but I cannot help thinking that there is no housing emergency plan after that. Following last week's statement, I mentioned the issue of sites not being able to progress because they cannot get grid connections, and I want to quickly raise a couple of other issues. It can take as long as two years for developers to get permissions, and there can be up-front costs amounting to hundreds of thousands of pounds before any work can be done. What is the minister doing to unlock development by speeding up the system and making the process cheaper?

Paul McLennan: There are a number of points to make. We are undertaking work with Homes for Scotland on stalled sites, as well as on issues that have been mentioned previously, such as water and so on. We are working very closely with it and local authorities on that issue.

We are also working with the Royal Town Planning Institute and local authorities to recruit more planners into the system. Our approach is targeted at five local authorities, including those in Edinburgh and Glasgow, which are under pressure in relation to that particular issue.

We are also taking other actions. This morning, I visited a five-bedroom empty home in Glasgow, and we are looking at getting people into it as soon as possible. Investment of £3.7 million has brought 11,000 homes back into use, and an additional £2 million has been invested this year. We have also extended the rural housing fund, which we talked about yesterday. Yesterday, the cabinet secretary and I met registered social landlords to talk about their role in the matter, and the housing investment task force, which looks to bring more finance into the sector, will publish its report very soon.

I am happy to engage with Mr Simpson on any of the issues that he has raised.

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): A constituent who found themselves homeless and was allocated emergency accommodation sought my assistance after racking up considerable debt through exorbitant electricity costs while trying to keep themselves warm in a poorly insulated property. How can the Scottish Government support energy efficiency improvements for emergency housing accommodation and ensure that people who find themselves in need of such emergency housing are treated with dignity and respect?

Paul McLennan: I am happy to pick up with Beatrice Wishart the concerns of her constituent. We work with local authorities, which have a duty to provide affordable housing, and, importantly, the heating of such housing must be affordable. I am happy to pick up the specific constituent point that she has raised.

Immigration White Paper (Discussions with United Kingdom Government)

8. **Stuart McMillan:** To ask the Scottish Government what discussions its population task force had with the UK Government regarding the proposals in the white paper on immigration, in advance of its publication. (S6O-04735)

The Minister for Equalities (Kaukab Stewart):

A key strand of the Scottish Government's migration strategy involves engagement with the United Kingdom Government to make the case for immigration system changes that will reflect Scotland's demographic and economic needs. The Scottish Government issued comprehensive, evidence-based proposals to the Home Office during the development of the white paper on immigration, but there was no substantive engagement from the Home Office following that. The white paper includes none of the Scottish Government's proposals and fails to account for Scotland's requirements. The ministerial population task force will discuss the policy implications of the white paper at its next meeting in June 2025.

Stuart McMillan: The minister will be aware that Inverclyde is one of seven areas in Scotland, and the only one in the central belt, to have seen its population decline between 2022 and 2023, according to the mid-year estimates. We have a reduced working-age population while our over-65 population has increased at a higher rate than the Scottish average, so those immigration proposals will have a detrimental impact on my constituency, especially because the demand for social care will only grow. Does the minister agree that, yet again, a one-size-fits-all policy from the UK Government is directly hampering areas such as Inverclyde from growing their working-age populations and supporting those who need care?

Kaukab Stewart: I absolutely agree with Stuart McMillan. The working-age population in his constituency is growing, but only because of migration. The one-size-fits-all policy approach, as outlined in the UK Government's white paper on immigration, poses a significant risk to Scotland's economy, our communities and our public services—not least to those in Inverclyde. That is why we are taking action where we can, including by providing £60,000 over two years to support delivery of a local authority-led strategy to address depopulation.

Ending international recruitment would have a profoundly negative and potentially catastrophic impact on the social care sector in many Scottish communities, including Inverclyde. The immigration system must reflect Scotland's distinct economic and demographic needs and must not pander to the likes of Nigel Farage.

Galloway and Ayrshire National Park Proposal

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): On a point of order, Deputy Presiding Officer. I seek to raise a point of order under rule 13.2 of Parliament's standing orders, which provides for ministerial statements to be subject to questioning by members. Although that rule ensures the opportunity for parliamentary scrutiny, I am concerned that such scrutiny is being undermined by the manner in which the Scottish Government is handling the forthcoming announcement on a possible Galloway and Ayrshire national park.

Specifically, the Government has indicated that there will be a ministerial statement today to set out ministers' response to a report submitted by NatureScot on the proposal for a Galloway national park. That report was submitted to ministers on 5 May and follows a public consultation process that closed in February 2025. Despite that consultation having closed more than three months ago, neither the NatureScot report nor the consultation responses have been published by the Government or by NatureScot ahead of today's statement. That is despite the clear impression being given that the NatureScot report would be available and despite the fact that consultation responses could be made available—at no doubt considerable cost to the taxpayer—if subject to a freedom of information request.

Such withholding of information stands in contrast to normal practice, in which consultation responses and an accompanying analysis are typically published in advance of any ministerial response, enabling members to consider the evidence and to engage in informed questioning.

In this case, members will be expected to respond to the cabinet secretary's announcement without having seen any of the underlying evidence that informed her decision. Such a lack of transparency raises serious questions about compliance with the spirit, if not the letter, of rule 13.2 of standing orders. Without access to the relevant documents, Parliament cannot properly exercise its duty to scrutinise the cabinet secretary's decision.

Deputy Presiding Officer, will you advise whether it is compatible with standing orders, particularly rule 13.2 on ministerial statements, for a minister to make a statement in Parliament and then take questions when members have been denied access to the key materials on which that statement is based, and which could have been publicly available for some time? Will you raise the matter with the Scottish Government to ensure that future statements, especially those that are made following a formal consultation process, are

handled in a way that enables full and meaningful scrutiny by members?

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): Thank you for that point of order, Mr Smyth. The Presiding Officer has made clear her expectations on what good practice looks like, as regards the Government keeping Parliament informed about statements. I note that the cabinet secretary will have heard what you said. She might wish to reflect on that when she responds to members' questions in due course.

I will take some time to reflect on whether I, or the Presiding Officer, can add anything to what I have just said. However, I welcome the fact that the point of order is now on the record.

We now come to the statement by Mairi Gougeon on the Galloway and Ayrshire national park proposal. The cabinet secretary will take questions at the end of her statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

14:56

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands (Mairi Gougeon): In 2021, the Scottish Government proposed the designation of at least one new national park in Scotland by 2026, subject to legal conditions being met. That proposal was debated in Parliament in June 2022 and was strongly supported by all parties, with several members calling for the Government to designate new parks as quickly as possible and some describing Galloway as

"a national park in waiting".—[*Official Report*, 7 June 2022; c 33; 65.]

In October 2023, the Scottish Government issued a public call to local communities and organisations across Scotland to submit nominations for their area to become Scotland's next national park. Detailed guidance on the nomination and appraisal process was published following a public consultation on the appraisal criteria. Nominations were received for five areas: Galloway and Ayrshire; Lochaber; Loch Awe; the Scottish Borders; and Tay forest. The nomination process demonstrated the outstanding natural and cultural heritage that we have in Scotland, as well as people's ambitions for the rural communities in which they live.

In spring 2024, the five nominations were appraised by an expert panel, and the Galloway and Ayrshire bid was selected to be subject to further investigation. Its proposal highlighted the area's diverse landscapes and stunning coastline, its outstanding biodiversity and its rich natural and cultural assets. It also made a strong case for the benefits that national park status could bring to local communities, the local economy and the

environment, by demonstrating what it could achieve for nature and people.

On 22 July 2024, the Scottish Government proposed the designation of Scotland's third national park in Galloway and south and east Ayrshire, subject to legal conditions being met. However, at that time, we were clear that the proposal required further investigation and consultation with local people and businesses. Those steps have been crucial in order to gauge the level of support and to understand people's views on more detailed aspects, including whether a national park could best meet the needs of the area and its communities.

NatureScot was appointed as the statutory reporter, to carry out the investigation, undertake a public consultation and report to the Scottish Government, as specified in the national parks legislation. Following an initial period of engagement with local communities, public bodies and stakeholders, NatureScot ran a 14-week consultation process from 7 November 2024 until 14 February 2025. More than 5,000 surveys were completed and more than 1,000 people attended events held across Galloway and south and east Ayrshire. The public events were independently facilitated by Outside the Box, which is an organisation with expertise in running community consultation events in an impartial, open and welcoming way. Sector-led consultation meetings took place with representatives from the farming, forestry, tourism, renewables and conservation sectors. NatureScot also held meetings with the three local authorities concerned and with community councils.

There has proven to be huge public interest in the proposal, which has generated both strong support and strong opposition. At times, the debate has become quite heated. That is understandable given how passionately people feel about their local area and the positive changes that they want to see.

It was extremely important that everyone with an interest had an opportunity to have their say on the proposal, and I thank all those who took part in the discussions, got involved in the process and responded to the consultation. All the views that were expressed have been taken into account in the reporter's report, and I have given them careful consideration.

I also thank NatureScot for its work in carrying out such an important and extensive public consultation process in a very robust and professional way. I am sure that members will appreciate the complexity and scale of that task. That has also been reflected in the independent review of the consultation process by the Scottish Community Development Centre. Its report states:

"NatureScot's engagement on the national park proposal achieved very impressive levels of public involvement".

It also states:

"this consultation compares very favourably with others and has demonstrated elements of very good practice in the use of the National Standards in Scotland".

In its role as the reporter, NatureScot has analysed the findings of the consultation and provided advice and recommendations to the Scottish Government. Those have been set out in a report that has been laid before Parliament today and published on the Scottish Government's website.

The report sets out that, of those who engaged with the consultation, 54 per cent of responses opposed the national park proposal and 42 per cent of responses supported it. The majority of consultation responses were completed by people living and working in Galloway and Ayrshire, with 94 per cent of responses coming from those in the area or within 30km of the proposed boundary. Taking account of local responses alone, 57 per cent opposed the proposal while 40 per cent were supportive of it. The report notes that support was greatest among environment, recreation and tourism sectors, while landowners, land managers and those working in the farming, forestry and renewable energy sectors had the strongest reservations.

Based on the evidence that was gathered during the investigation and consultation, the reporter has advised that, although it considers that the proposed area meets the conditions for a national park, as set out in the legislation, the proposal does not have sufficient clarity, nor has it garnered sufficient local support to proceed to the next stage of designation.

I want to put on record my thanks to everyone who has been involved in the process. We have listened to the people of Galloway and Ayrshire. We have noted the views expressed by communities, organisations and businesses and we respect those views. We have carefully considered the advice and recommendations of the reporter. We have weighed up the arguments for and against the creation of a new national park in the area, taking full account of the potential economic, social and environmental factors, and we have come to the conclusion not to proceed with the designation of a national park in Galloway and Ayrshire.

I realise that the decision will be very disappointing for those who have been campaigning for a new national park in Galloway for many years. I also recognise the huge amount of work and time that has been invested by a great many people throughout the process. I thank everyone who was involved in that process,

including members of the Galloway National Park Association and the Galloway and Southern Ayrshire United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization—UNESCO—Biosphere.

The Galloway and Ayrshire proposal has generated a lot of debate about the role and value of national parks in Scotland more generally. Again, I am grateful to all those who put forward their views and perspectives on that during the consultation process, and the Government has listened carefully to all the views that were expressed.

Although we have decided not to proceed with the designation of a new national park in Galloway and Ayrshire in light of the consultation findings and the reporter's conclusions, I stress that the Government remains committed to national parks in Scotland and their vital leadership role in tackling the climate and biodiversity crises, promoting sustainable land management and supporting the economic and social development of local communities.

There is plenty of evidence to show that our national parks are achieving for people and nature. In Loch Lomond and the Trossachs, the national park authority is working proactively with a wide range of public, private and third sector partners to reduce carbon emissions, restore peatland, protect and restore precious wildlife and habitats, generate investment and jobs in the local area and manage more than four million visitors to the park each year.

That is also true in Cairngorms, where the national park authority is at the forefront of the ambitious Cairngorms 2030 partnership programme, with more than £40 million being invested in the park area over five years to restore and enhance nature, reduce flood risk, support regenerative farming, improve active and sustainable transport, empower local communities and improve people's health and wellbeing.

We will continue to support our existing national parks, and we remain open to proposals for new national parks in the future. Any proposals must be built on grass-roots community support and consensus.

As we set out in our most recent programme for government, this Government is listening and wants to bring people together, because the most effective solutions emerge when we work in partnership.

We fully recognise and appreciate that the consultation period has been a challenging time for local communities. It has also raised some really important issues that people in Galloway and Ayrshire care deeply about—from improved transport links, affordable housing and health services to business investment, support for rural

industries, environmental protections and opportunities for young people. What is important going forward is that we take note of the issues, concerns and opportunities that have been raised during the consultation process and that we place a renewed focus on delivering for the people of south-west Scotland.

There are very strong foundations to build on, given the area's importance for sustainable and regenerative farming and forestry, renewable energy and other land-based activity. There are also strong regional partnerships and structures in place, including the regional land use partnership and framework, the UNESCO biosphere, the natural capital innovation zone and the responsible tourism strategy, all of which are supported by the region's economic partnership and South of Scotland Enterprise.

In its role as reporter, NatureScot has made some recommendations on ways in which those existing structures and arrangements could be further strengthened. South of Scotland Enterprise has also suggested that there could be benefits in exploring an alternative approach, drawing on the unique assets and existing structures in the south of Scotland. We are really grateful for these suggestions, and we now need to take time to reflect on them and give them deeper consideration.

In the meantime, the Scottish Government remains firmly committed to working in partnership with local communities and organisations across the south-west of Scotland to reduce carbon emissions, enhance and restore nature, support our rural industries, bring forward investment and deliver growth and jobs that enable the area and its people to flourish.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The cabinet secretary will now take questions on the issues raised in her statement. I intend to allow around 20 minutes for that, after which we will need to move on to the next item of business. I ask members who wish to ask a question and who have not already done so to press their request-to-speak buttons.

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): I thank the cabinet secretary for the early sight of her statement. I declare an interest as a proud Gallovidian who was born and bred in one of the most historic and beautiful places in the world.

In the previous session of Parliament, I and others initially supported a Galloway national park lite that focused on much-needed sustainable economic development. However, my support and that of others changed when the Bute house agreement saw Green minister Lorna Slater push forward a top-down proposal that felt more like a

Green nationalist park than a community-led initiative—a designation imposed rather than a designation requested.

I welcome the Scottish Government's decision. That outcome rightly reflects the views of the majority of local residents, land managers and businesses. However, although the decision is correct, the process that led us here has been deeply flawed. The Government's approach was marked by poor communication, shifting expectations and a lack of transparency. Communities across Galloway invested time, energy and hope in what should have been a positive process of bringing communities together to improve a region. What we ultimately got felt like a top-down and predetermined process. We were continually told that a Galloway national park would be different, but we were never told how.

We should have had an independent review of existing parks so that lessons could have been learned to form a firm foundation for the creation of new parks. Cabinet secretary, can you explain what specific evidence or community feedback informed your decision not to designate the national park? How do you intend to rebuild trust with the communities that feel that the process has been mishandled from the outset? Does the cabinet secretary have any plans to amend the current legislation to address some of the identified shortcomings?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Always speak though the chair.

Mairi Gougeon: Finlay Carson has raised a few important points that I want to address. First, on the criticism of the process, it has certainly not been top down. He makes accusations that it was predetermined from the start, but that is not the case. If members look at the announcement that we have made today, they can see that the process was always about listening to what the people of Galloway and Ayrshire want to see in their area. That is what NatureScot has given due consideration to through all its rounds of consultation, as much as anything else. It is not fair to criticise the process leading up to that point. Extra steps were added to the process to ensure that there was a bottom-up approach.

I know that Finlay Carson will have met the Galloway National Park Association, which I first met when I was appointed as a minister in 2018 and which has been building a campaign from that point. I appreciate that members might not have had the opportunity to go through the full detail of the reports that were circulated before the statement but, in its report, the Scottish Community Development Centre identified that the proposal was built on significant engagement work that had taken place up until that time.

On how we move forward from here, as I said in my statement, I recognise how heated the debate has become and the divisions in communities over the park proposal. That is why I wanted to set out as early as possible how we are moving forward on receipt of NatureScot's report. As I outlined in my statement, some of the suggestions and proposals that have come through the detailed consultation and engagement process are really valuable. It is important that we take time to consider them fully and to get this right before we set out how we will move forward. I am more than happy to meet Finlay Carson to discuss that further and to hear whether there are any other potential avenues that he would like us to explore.

Colin Smyth: For too long, Galloway has been Scotland's forgotten corner. Today, the Government made it clear that it wants to tear down the welcome to Dumfries and Galloway signs and put up no entry ones instead. Why is it that every idea that this incompetent, useless Government touches falls apart? Why is its only ambition for Galloway to turn the region into a dumping ground for wind farms, with no local jobs?

The cabinet secretary knows that she could have brought forward plans for Galloway that supported farming and forestry and helped them thrive. She could have built something special and made a change for the better. Instead, she has taken the easy way out and walked away. This doing-nothing Government has failed to set out an alternative to its inaction. There is no plan B to fix a local economy that is built on low pay, and there is no action to stop the fastest depopulation in mainland Scotland.

We know that national park status brings more than £10 million a year of direct funding from the Government. Is that money still on the table, or is this just one more betrayal by a Government that has given up on Galloway?

Mairi Gougeon: Again, there is a lot in there that I absolutely disagree with. I refute those allegations about Galloway and its region, because we recognise how significant Galloway, Ayrshire and the south of Scotland are. That is why we have invested so much in the region across a number of different organisations.

A lot of work is on-going in the area at the moment. There is all the work that South of Scotland Enterprise is undertaking. There is the work of the biosphere. There are all the strategies, the natural capital innovation zone, the regional land use partnership and the framework that is being developed on the back of that. All of that is happening because we want to invest in the area and see it succeed.

I recognise that there are issues, a lot of which were drawn out in the consultation and some of which the member has touched on. That is why the next steps that we take are so critically important, and we have to take time to get that right.

NatureScot's report has recommendations on building on existing structures. We want to have those conversations to see how we can move forward in a way that will benefit the people and communities of Galloway and south and east Ayrshire.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): It is clear that there is no current consensus from the local communities in Galloway and Ayrshire about the way forward. That is exactly why the Scottish Government's consultation was so important—because it established what the views are.

The cabinet secretary has intimated this already, but I ask her to say more about how the communities can be supported to engage with one another on what is next. Will she also say more about plans for the future with regard to what is in the best interests of Galloway and Ayrshire?

Mairi Gougeon: First and foremost in all this are the people who live in Galloway and Ayrshire and their views. That is why the extensive engagement that has been undertaken in relation to the proposal was so important. It was remiss of me earlier not to thank Lorna Slater for all that she did in her role as minister in taking forward the work and ensuring that there was very much a bottom-up approach, in contrast to some of the accusations that have flown round the chamber this afternoon. We want to hear what people in Galloway and Ayrshire have to say about this and how they want to move forward.

The recent consultation flagged a number of issues, as I touched on in my statement. They vary from concerns about the climate and biodiversity to a strong interest in transport and improving roads, and from issues around economic development more broadly to affordable housing and trying to secure opportunities for young people so that they stay in the area and it thrives and flourishes. As I have outlined, we see that information as really important. We have listened to the responses to the consultation and we want to take time to make sure that we get the next steps right.

Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con): The cabinet secretary mentioned the important issues that people in Ayrshire care deeply about, from roads, affordable housing and health services to business investment, environmental protection and opportunities for young people. Those concerns have not changed. Can the cabinet secretary tell us more about what the renewed

focus will look like and when it will start to deliver for the people of south-west Scotland? The statement also mentions strong regional partnerships and structures, including the UNESCO biosphere. Concerns were raised recently about the long-term funding for that—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please be brief.

Sharon Dowey: Will the cabinet secretary commit to looking into it?

Mairi Gougeon: Sharon Dowey made a couple of points, and I am more than happy to follow up with her in detail across the areas that she mentioned. Earlier, Finlay Carson asked my colleague the Cabinet Secretary for Transport a question about transport links, including investment in the A75 and the work that is progressing there. Notwithstanding the issues in the area, work is going on across a number of areas to address that and to provide the investment to follow it.

Sharon Dowey also mentioned the biosphere, which does tremendous work. The reporter's report is important, because it talks about the structures and how those can be built on and strengthened in future. We want to address that, have discussions with the various organisations and see how we move forward from there.

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): It is vital that we continue to support nature recovery and improve biodiversity in Scotland, as the cabinet secretary has already said. Can she say more about the Scottish Government's work to combat nature loss?

Mairi Gougeon: It is vital that we tackle the two biggest crises that we face today: climate change and biodiversity loss. Regardless of whether a national park structure is in place, we have to ensure that we take action to address those.

Members across the chamber will be aware of the work that we are doing on biodiversity, including publishing our strategy and biodiversity plan, which includes a range of more than 100 actions that we are taking to address the biodiversity crisis. We are trying to deliver on that through the nature restoration fund, which has, so far, provided more than £65 million to more than 250 projects to address some of the most acute issues across Scotland.

The nature restoration fund is not the only mechanism that we have. In my portfolio, the agri-environment climate scheme also looks to tackle some of those issues, and that work will continue.

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): Given that Loch Lomond and the Trossachs national park generates £540 million a year and supports more than 6,000 jobs, and that the expanded Cairngorms national park generates £419 million

annually and supports 5,400 jobs, what is the Scottish Government's plan? What specific actions will it take and what investment will it make to ensure that communities in Galloway and Ayrshire do not miss out?

Mairi Gougeon: Sarah Boyack raises important points about the value of our existing national parks. When we look at the jobs that they support and consider that Loch Lomond and the Trossachs national park generates £540 million a year and how the rangers manage visitors, we see that there is no question about the value of the parks. However, the decision that we reached was based ultimately on the work that has been done by NatureScot as reporter, its consultation with communities on the ground and its recommendations.

As I have outlined in some of my responses, it is not possible for me to set out the path forward or what investment there will be, because the discussion about how we take this forward, by engaging with existing bodies in the way that NatureScot proposed, will be important to ensuring that we get it right.

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): As the cabinet secretary outlined in her statement, many stakeholders and respondents to the consultation highlighted the local economy as central to their considerations. Can she expand on the Scottish Government's work to boost and develop the regional economy in the south of Scotland?

Mairi Gougeon: As I have outlined this afternoon, we are investing in the region in a range of ways, because we want it to thrive and we want its economy to be successful. We should consider some of the work in the area that has been undertaken by organisations such as South of Scotland Enterprise, which I have mentioned a few times this afternoon. It continues to deliver tangible benefits for businesses and communities right across the south of Scotland.

Last year alone, the agency invested £13.7 million across different projects, including the Chapelcross energy transition zone and the Borders innovation park, which has had the economic benefit of helping to create and safeguard around 1,700 jobs. That is just South of Scotland Enterprise—we continue to invest in a range of bodies and mechanisms, because we want the region to be a success.

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): The Galloway national park was a once-in-a-generation opportunity for local communities to deliver investment in tourism, the food economy, nature, transport and housing, while getting more local control over forestry and wind farm developments. All that has been lost because

of a failure of the Government—and some local politicians, such as Mr Carson—to show leadership and to counter an aggressive misinformation campaign from landed interests. Communities in Perthshire, meanwhile, showed majority public support for a new Tay forest national park, despite facing a similar aggressive misinformation campaign. Will the Government now re-engage with that bid for Scotland's third national park, or has it simply given up on the idea altogether?

Mairi Gougeon: As I outlined in my statement—and I hope that I have been clear on this today—the Government is, of course, open to establishing more national parks in Scotland, but we need to ensure that we get the process right.

I will not set out today that we are not looking to revisit other bids or proposals. We reached the stage of introducing the proposal to designate Galloway as a national park only because it met all the criteria that had been established and consulted on. We are not looking to do that at the moment, but we remain open to doing so in the future.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): Sarah Boyack was right to remind us that, when done properly, national parks can provide jobs, be a boost to local economies and help with biodiversity in our fight against climate change. It is clear that that has not happened in this case, and we did not win hearts and minds to bring the project to fruition.

I want to interrogate an aspect of the statement in which the cabinet secretary said that the Government would welcome future proposals for the national parks. Does that mean that all proactive work by the Scottish Government to identify future national parks will now cease?

Mairi Gougeon: I am sorry, but I am not entirely sure where the member is trying to get to with his question on whether the Government is actively looking to continue with the process. We established the process a number of years ago, with various stages, a number of which we had consulted on to ensure that we were developing a bottom-up approach and that, if we were to propose a national park, it would be in an area where there was strong community support for it.

We have been through that process and we have exhausted it. We then followed the statutory process and appointed NatureScot as reporter. On receipt of that report, we concluded that we would not take the process any further. I will not revisit, or commit to revisiting, that decision today.

Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): How can the Scottish Government help to support the vital work of the Galloway and Southern Ayrshire Biosphere Partnership—the first

UNESCO biosphere in Scotland—to fully realise its potential and aims of creating sustainable tourism across my constituency of Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley, as well as Dumfries and Galloway, especially now, when the biosphere's funding and sustainability are in question? The partnership has, to date, received amazing buy-in from community groups, towns, villages and businesses that are working to increase biodiversity efforts in low-carbon days out for residents and visitors to the area.

Mairi Gurgeon: Elena Whitham raises not only important points about the importance of the work that the biosphere undertakes and how important it is in the region, but valuable points about sustainable tourism and the encouragement thereof, in relation to which a lot of work is going on.

I know that the Galloway and Southern Ayrshire Biosphere Partnership received a new funding package from South of Scotland Enterprise to support its important work in tackling the climate and nature crises and to support sustainable development, including sustainable tourism. We welcome the funding that has been introduced.

As I said in my statement, we will take some time to reflect on the reporter's recommendations, which talked about building on the existing structures, before we set out next steps.

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): I welcome the decision, given the clear level of concern among campaigners, stakeholders and local communities. I recognise that the consultation led to real concern and anxiety among those communities, which have long been neglected by the Scottish National Party. Will the Government now undertake to come forward with a real plan for investment in rural areas that can deliver for communities in Dumfries and Galloway and East Ayrshire to support tourism, agriculture and infrastructure in the south of Scotland, which the SNP has failed to do in the past 18 years?

Mairi Gurgeon: I completely refute everything that Craig Hoy has said, because we have a very strong track record of investing in all the areas that he talked about.

Craig Hoy touched on agriculture and, specifically in relation to my portfolio interests, I will say that it was this Government that decided to protect and maintain direct payments for farmers in Scotland when his Government down south did away with them completely and did nothing to protect the agriculture industry. I happily stand by my Government's record on investing in rural Scotland.

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): I declare an interest, as my sons are Gallovidians and I lived

and worked there for many years, when I saw the beautiful landscape buried by the Forestry Commission overplanting Sitka spruce.

I find the reporter's results disappointing—I understand them, but they are disappointing—as Galloway could well do with increased tourism opportunities, which would provide work that would help to redress the imbalance in demographics. I do not know whether the cabinet secretary will know this, but, given its interest in the economy, does South of Scotland Enterprise have any options that might be open to the Government?

Mairi Gurgeon: Christine Grahame talks about South of Scotland Enterprise, which, as I touched on in my statement, has made a proposal for how we could move forward. We are giving strong consideration to that proposal.

It is important to recognise that we are building on a strong base. I recognise some of the concerns that were raised during the consultation and some of the issues that we have touched on today, but the strength of some of the sectors in all the communities—including farming, forestry, the renewables industry—and of all the important industries and sectors that we have across the south of Scotland, as well as some of the organisations that I have mentioned, shows that we are building on strong foundations. It is that strength that I am keen to build on.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the ministerial statement on the Galloway and Ayrshire national park proposal. There will be a brief pause before we move to the next item of business to allow front-bench teams to change positions.

NHS Grampian

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a statement by Neil Gray on NHS Grampian. The cabinet secretary will take questions at the end of his statement. Therefore, there should be no interventions or interruptions.

15:27

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): I wish to update Parliament on our decision to escalate NHS Grampian to stage 4 of the NHS Scotland support and intervention framework.

I once again acknowledge that staff in NHS Grampian continue to work tirelessly to deliver the high-quality healthcare that we expect. Our intervention is in no way a reflection on the excellent care and support that they offer local people each and every day, nor should we forget the significant health service innovations and improvements, which I have seen first-hand during visits to Grampian.

Indeed, the purpose of the intervention is to enable local staff to go further. We will do so by providing the right balance of scrutiny and support to stabilise the system, ensuring a robust basis for the wider local transformation that is required over the longer term. We are determined to do that in a way that is not detrimental to key, front-line services.

NHS Grampian has been experiencing significant financial and operational pressures for several months. That prompted the escalation of the health board to stage 3 of the NHS Scotland support and intervention framework for financial management in January this year.

Stage 3 is the first formal stage of escalation and, as such, NHS Grampian has been receiving a package of tailored support. However, significant concerns remain about the board's financial position, plans, leadership and governance, and about any associated impact that they might be having on the delivery of local services.

We heard a number of those concerns during the members' business debate on NHS Grampian that was secured by Douglas Lumsden on 22 April. At that time, I assured the chamber that I would keep the board's escalation position under close review, and that, if required, I would not hesitate to act further in the best interests of local people.

Following careful consideration, the Government announced on 12 May that NHS Grampian's escalation status had been raised to stage 4 of the

framework for finance, leadership and governance.

NHS Grampian had the largest financial deficit of any health board in 2024-25. It reported a forecast outturn deficit of £65.1 million. Indeed, despite record funding of more than £1.34 billion in the current financial year, and the tailored support that is already offered under stage 3 of the framework, the board will be in receipt of cumulative brokerage from the Government in excess of £90 million across the past two years.

Concerns remain about future financial pressures for NHS Grampian, and there is insufficient confidence that the board's current plans will arrest the rate of expenditure and deliver the sustainable recovery that is required. We cannot tolerate that position. It is therefore our judgment that further formal escalation is necessary. Along with the additional support and scrutiny that that will provide, we must seek to mitigate the significant financial risks to the local board and, more widely, the overall national health service.

Alongside financial management issues, NHS Grampian is being escalated due to rising concerns about local services. That includes the operational pressures that led the board to declare a critical incident for three days last November, diverting some activity to other board areas due to capacity constraints.

The board has since referred to a number of on-going "intolerable risks", including with regard to its ability to respond effectively to persistent demand and pressures on local unscheduled and planned care.

The Government and the national centre for sustainable delivery have been engaging with and supporting the board for some time to help it to assess delivery and target sustained improvements in local unscheduled care performance. Indeed, I want to be clear that this is an escalation in support and scrutiny for NHS Grampian. As such, it will build on the previous support and improvement activity that has been undertaken.

The support provided to date has come from a range of providers, including the Government's financial delivery unit and Healthcare Improvement Scotland. By way of an example, I note that the centre for sustainable delivery has provided bespoke clinical support to NHS Grampian and has identified opportunities that will support improvements. That includes a focus on reducing hospital occupancy to improve flow and reducing turnaround times for the ambulance service. There is the potential to build on the current local model of flow navigation, and work is under way with the board to develop that further.

I should reiterate that, by accessing extra funding from an additional £30 million national investment in planned care, NHS Grampian was able to deliver more than 23,000 additional appointments and procedures last year. We will continue to support the board in building on that work. Indeed, we are providing an additional £3.3 million to NHS Grampian in 2025-26 for two mobile MRI scanners and one mobile CT scanner. Those resources are set to deliver more than 19,000 additional scans over the course of the year.

Nonetheless, financial and operational issues persist, and it is right that we now act further. We heard in the recent members' business debate on NHS Grampian about the long-standing demographic, demand and capacity pressures across the local health and social care system. We understand that those pressures will require a comprehensive local strategy to deliver the fundamental transformation that is required and that that will not happen overnight. The key focus of the further escalation will be to mitigate immediate concerns about the financial and associated operational pressures and to stabilise the local system.

Another concern that we heard during the members' business debate in late April was about the leadership of the board, with the interim chief executive having announced his intention to retire earlier this year. I am advised that there is a strong shortlist of candidates for the chief executive post, with the final interviews scheduled for early June. As such, we are confident of making a successful appointment in the near future.

As I have said, the purpose of the intervention is to stabilise the system and provide a robust basis for the wider local transformation work that is required over the longer term and in support of the new leadership. One of the key initial elements of the package of enhanced support and scrutiny will be a whole-system diagnostic. KPMG has been appointed to carry out that work, and we expect it to report by the end of June.

The overarching goal of the diagnostic is to better understand how the whole system is operating and, in partnership with NHS Grampian, determine which changes the board could realistically effect within its financial envelope. The diagnostic will establish a shared, data-driven understanding of the current operation of the whole system and provide insight into the specific issues that NHS Grampian faces; review the existing service models and relationships with financial management, ensuring that assets are being optimised and care is being delivered effectively in the right place; and identify what further cross-boundary collaboration could take place with other NHS boards, particularly in the

north of Scotland, to support NHS Grampian to mitigate its operational risks.

I am determined that the scope of the diagnostic and subsequent work will not be limited and that it should extend to all relevant areas of local service delivery and expenditure. The whole-system diagnostic will help to inform the board's detailed improvement plan and the tailored package of scrutiny and support that will underpin it.

As with other stage 4 escalations in the past, the Government will establish an assurance board, which will report to the director general for health and social care and chief executive of NHS Scotland. That board, which will be chaired by a Scottish Government director, will be tasked with providing oversight of NHS Grampian's progress against the specific actions in its improvement plan.

I also want to recognise the concerns raised in the members' business debate about local management meaningfully engaging with, and properly listening to, front-line staff—a point that was alighted on in particular by Kevin Stewart, both in that debate and in his more recent topical question. Meaningful partnership working with local staff and their representatives will be necessary for NHS Grampian to successfully develop and implement its improvement plan.

We expect all boards, including NHS Grampian, to have robust systems and processes in place for engaging with and involving colleagues in their planning and strategies, in line with our NHS Scotland national staff governance standard.

NHS Grampian must work closely with its staff-side, trade union and professional organisation representatives in its area partnership forum to ensure that it listens and responds to concerns raised by staff and that their views help to inform future activity. Similarly, we expect the full engagement of local clinical views, not least through the NHS Grampian area clinical forum. The Government's assurance board will look for evidence of that meaningful partnership working around the development and implementation of NHS Grampian's improvement plan.

I hope that this statement assures members that we take the issues very seriously and that I will continue to keep them updated on the next steps, including on the specific actions required as part of the board's improvement plan and the shape of the on-going support and scrutiny that will be provided by the Government.

I reiterate that we remain committed to supporting the new leadership of NHS Grampian to turn the position around. We need to mitigate the immediate risks around the financial and associated operational pressures that the board faces, and to help to stabilise the system. That will

provide a robust basis for the wider local transformation required over the longer term, under the new board chief executive.

Foremost in our considerations of this matter must be the people who are served by NHS Grampian. I know that we are all united in wanting the very best for them.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The cabinet secretary will now take questions on the issues raised in his statement. I intend to allow around 20 minutes, after which we will need to move on to the next item of business. I ask members who wish to ask a question to press their request-to-speak buttons.

Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con): I thank the cabinet secretary for advance sight of his statement.

Neil Gray visited Aberdeen royal infirmary in February this year. He promised that he would do everything that he could to improve the situation there. However, we have only to look at this week's ambulance waiting times to see that it is getting worse. With lives at stake, it does not give a single person here any pleasure at all to point out that the Scottish National Party has failed NHS Grampian and its patients.

The reasons for such a dire performance and stage 4 escalation are not the junior doctors, nurses, paramedics and porters—they are trying their absolute level best. No, NHS Grampian is in such trouble because it has been hollowed out by successive SNP Governments. The health board has a history of chronic underfunding, persistent understaffing, the lowest bed base in Scotland per head of population and a national treatment centre on ice. There are massive cuts to health and social care partnership budgets for caring for the elderly and vulnerable. General practitioner practices are folding and major injuries units are on restricted hours.

The Scottish Conservatives have repeatedly warned the SNP Government about this perfect storm. With underfunding of a quarter of a billion pounds, how can NHS Grampian be expected to pay back a Government loan? What is the trigger point for escalation to stage 5?

Neil Gray: I do not accept the characterisation that Tess White has set out. NHS Grampian is part of the same funding arrangements as the rest of the health boards across Scotland and has a similar level of funding to them through the NHS Scotland resource allocation committee.

I recognise that there are financial challenges, which is why we have escalated NHS Grampian through the framework and why we are supporting it with the whole-system diagnostic provided by KPMG to look at options for providing better

financial stability. We have taken the step of escalating NHS Grampian to stage 4 because of the concerns about performance, ambulance turnaround times and unscheduled care pathways, to which Tess White referred, and because we were not convinced that a plan was in place that would be sufficient to improve that situation or to improve the financial position. That is why, as I committed to do on my visit in February, we are doing everything possible to support the health board. That process starts with escalation to stage 4.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): NHS Grampian was escalated to stage 3 in January and, four months later, it has been escalated to stage 4. The Government knew that the situation was bad in January, and it was told that again in March, when the health board submitted its financial plans, so why on earth did the Government wait before acting and further escalating the board's status? Why has the Government allowed 13,500 patients in Grampian to wait for more than a year for tests or treatment? Why have both the 31-day and 62-day cancer treatment targets been missed? In the interests of patients and staff, the Government really should have acted faster.

There are seven other health boards in the escalation framework because of poor performance. That means that more than half the health boards in Scotland are failing staff and patients. Will the cabinet secretary finally heed the warnings from Audit Scotland and cut the number of health boards to improve governance arrangements?

Neil Gray: No, I will not, because I do not think that taking that top-down structural approach at a time when we need to deliver for people is the action that is required. We have set out the first stage of our plans for immediate delivery in the operational improvement plan, and we are doing further work on our vision for health and social care services in Scotland by developing a population health framework and a service renewal framework, which will look at reform and renewal and the way in which we deliver our services in Scotland.

I am committed to supporting the staff to deliver against the clear priorities that we have set on waiting times, planned care and access to unscheduled care pathways and general practice to ensure that, whether in NHS Grampian or any other part of the country, we continue to see improvement for the people of Scotland.

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): Reports earlier this year suggested that NHS Grampian faces additional costs to the tune of £20 million per year as a result of Labour's careless decision to increase employer national insurance

contributions. Will the cabinet secretary outline what assessment the Scottish Government has made of that issue in the light of what is already a difficult fiscal environment for NHS Grampian?

Neil Gray: I thank Jackie Dunbar for her question, because she provides important context for the financial situation with which the Government is wrestling in relation to health services across Scotland. *[Interruption.]*

We know that the increase in employer national insurance contributions is a tax on public services in Scotland. The money that was provided allowed us to provide 60 per cent coverage for the directly employed staff, including those in NHS Grampian, and the remainder is having to be provided through savings or other efficiencies in services. I do not think that that is an acceptable position for Labour to defend. I do not want that tax on public services in Scotland to continue. The issue needs to be resolved at source at Westminster.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I encourage members to listen to the questions and the responses with a degree more respect than was the case for that exchange.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): The disaster at NHS Grampian has not come out of nowhere. Brokerage has been provided to the board for the past two years, and there have been various stages of escalation over the past number of months. Indeed, a critical incident was declared as long ago as in November. Therefore, why has it taken until now for the cabinet secretary to engage KPMG? At what cost is KPMG being engaged? Will he commit to publishing KPMG's report on receipt? What responsibility does the cabinet secretary bear for failing to get a handle on the situation before now?

Neil Gray: We took steps to ensure that we responded to the situation, first by declaring a critical incident and then by providing NHS Grampian with support on its operational improvement plan to ensure that it was able to respond to the critical incident and to demonstrate that it had a plan that would ensure that such an incident would not happen again. I do not believe that such a plan has materialised to provide sufficient confidence on unscheduled care pathways in Grampian.

We escalated the board in relation to its financial position in January. We have not had confidence that the additional support and scrutiny have borne the fruit that they should have. That is why, in short order—within months—we have escalated the board further to stage 4.

KPMG was chosen to conduct the work after a competitive tender. The other bids that we received were in very similar ball parks, so we are confident that we have obtained good value for

money and that the cost reflects the market value. We will continue to work to ensure that KPMG's work delivers improvements for people in the NHS Grampian area.

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): This is not the first time this year that NHS Grampian has been discussed in the chamber, with members of all parties recently highlighting concerns about the specific issue of ambulance wait times in the board area. I welcome the cabinet secretary's update on the work that is under way to reduce turnaround times for ambulances. However, how is the Scottish Government supporting NHS Grampian's work to respond to the centre for sustainable delivery's recommendations on the issue and to help to improve patient flow from the emergency department?

Neil Gray: Audrey Nicoll alights on a particular area on which people served by NHS Grampian wish to see demonstrable progress and on which we have tried to provide support through the centre for sustainable delivery. On Audrey Nicoll's example of ambulance triage, we are seeing movement happening. We need to see continued improvement in ambulance triage, including a reduction in the risk of patients waiting in an ambulance and more effective prioritisation and, where appropriate, redirection to other care pathways. The rapid ambulatory assessment centre is now seeing 25 to 35 patients daily, with an increased footprint and extended operating hours. There is increased respiratory and frailty capacity locally, with two extra wards having been opened as step-down areas for high-demand specialties. We need to build on that progress through this escalation to ensure that ambulance stacking, particularly at Aberdeen royal infirmary, and critical incidents such as the one before Christmas cannot happen again. However, we are seeing improvements in unscheduled care pathways.

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): Will the cabinet secretary guarantee that appointments and operations will not be cancelled to pay the costs of what his statement identifies as resource and, particularly, management problems, rather than just issues of demand?

The cabinet secretary makes much of the crucial appointment of a new chief executive. I point out that the previous chief executive lasted only 14 months before announcing his retirement. What confidence can Parliament have that a new chief executive will be able to get a grip of the situation, which appears to be rapidly deteriorating?

Neil Gray: There are two areas there. First, Adam Coldwells, who I thank for his service, was an interim chief executive. The appointment was

interim, and a substantive appointment was always going to need to be made. As I said in my statement, I am confident that a substantive appointment can be made and that we will see the leadership that is required to turn around the situation in Grampian.

On the first point, I have already set out, in response to a topical question the other week, that I want financial decisions to be taken that do not impact on front-line services and which ensure that we enhance service delivery. I would expect that for the patients of NHS Grampian, and I know that Mr Marra would, too.

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast)

(SNP): Will the cabinet secretary provide an update on the activity that has been delivered through the additional £30 million that was allocated in 2024-25 to reduce waiting times in NHS Grampian? What further work will the Scottish Government undertake to ensure that reductions continue?

Neil Gray: By accessing extra funding from the additional national investment of £30 million in planned care, NHS Grampian delivered more than 23,000 additional appointments and procedures last year. As part of our £100 million investment to clear backlogs and substantially improve waiting times, NHS Grampian has been allocated almost £7 million in funding to deliver additional appointments and procedures. That includes funding of almost £2.3 million for cancer services, £1.2 million for ear, nose and throat services, £600,000 for orthopaedics and about £330,000 for ophthalmology.

In addition, we have allocated £2.6 million for the national treatment centre Highland to deliver thousands of additional orthopaedic and ophthalmic operations for patients across the north of Scotland, including those from NHS Grampian.

As I have said, £3.3 million of funding has been provided for two mobile MRI and CT scanners in NHS Grampian, which will ensure that patients get the diagnostic tests that they need. Alongside the further £2.5 million that is targeted at endoscopies, that will deliver an additional 5,000 scans.

Lorna Slater (Lothian) (Green): Yesterday, Aberdeenshire's integration joint board voted through significant cuts to disabled and other people's services. That comes on top of the UK Government's cruel cuts to social security for disabled people and today's worrying news about the state of NHS Grampian. What will the Scottish Government do to ensure that disabled people in particular are able to access the health and social care that they need in Aberdeenshire?

Neil Gray: Lorna Slater highlights an issue that is of great concern to me. *[Interruption.]* I heard Conservative members say that it has nothing to

do with what we are talking about, but it has everything to do with that. I am extremely concerned about capacity potentially being lost in community services in Aberdeenshire. I am committed to making sure that the Government is providing all the resource that is possible through our local authority funding, as well as through the funding for health boards that should be arriving with our integration joint boards to provide the services that are required. That will ensure that we retain greater capacity and support in communities to prevent people's ill health from escalating to a point where they require secondary care services or where we have the unscheduled care demand that we are seeing in Grampian.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western)

(LD): Many people will, understandably, be concerned by the cabinet secretary's statement and the escalation at NHS Grampian, and none more so than pregnant mothers, people who are undergoing cancer care and surgical patients from Shetland and Orkney, all of whom rely on services at NHS Grampian. Beatrice Wishart asked the cabinet secretary about that earlier this month, but I ask him today to reassure residents of island communities who rely on NHS Grampian that they will enjoy the same access to services and care as mainland patients.

Neil Gray: In response to Beatrice Wishart, I recognised that NHS Grampian serves more than just the Grampian geographical area. On the basis of a service level agreement, it serves other communities, including those in Orkney and Shetland.

In response to Karen Adam's question, I set out some of the funding that is arriving this year to allow for increased planned care activity, and that will benefit those in Orkney and Shetland as well as those who are domiciled in the Grampian area. I am happy to furnish Mr Cole-Hamilton, Beatrice Wishart and you, Deputy Presiding Officer, given your interest, with that detail.

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde)

(SNP): What are the expectations of the whole-system diagnostic that will take place in NHS Grampian? How will its results be used to inform next steps?

Neil Gray: The work involves a team of independent healthcare consultants reviewing key areas of NHS Grampian's performance, including financial grip and control alongside leadership and governance. KPMG, which is the contracted consultant, will work alongside NHS Grampian and report to Government. That will help to inform agreement, through working closely with NHS Grampian, about the next steps and the support that is required as part of the stage 4 escalation. We expect the initial findings from that consultancy report to be available by the end of June.

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland)

(Con): It is clear that NHS Grampian is suffering from a serious leadership crisis. I welcome the fact that there is at last progress on recruiting a new chief executive. The board has for far too long not had a permanent chief executive in place, with waiting lists spiralling and financial difficulties deepening.

Leadership comes from the top. I genuinely appreciate that the cabinet secretary met me and my colleagues to discuss the issues that we have raised. However, does he agree that it is time for the chair of NHS Grampian, who has presided over the mess, to be moved on immediately so that a leader who better understands the scale of the challenge can be appointed?

Neil Gray: We will see new leadership coming into NHS Grampian in the form of a new chief executive. I want to work with the existing chair to address the issues that have arisen and the reasons for the escalation around leadership and financial control. We will keep working with the chair to ensure that that is the case.

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden)

(SNP): Will the cabinet secretary outline how NHS Scotland's support and intervention framework works as part of an evidence-based approach to monitoring performance and managing risk across the NHS?

Neil Gray: The support and intervention framework is one of the key elements of our evidence-based approach to monitoring performance and managing risk across the NHS. It is important to recognise that territorial health boards are separate legal entities that have their own governance and performance management responsibilities. The Government's role is to maintain an overview and hold boards to account for the significant public investment that is made in them.

We have to get the balance right in providing appropriate support and scrutiny. The framework has five stages in its ladder of escalation, which provides a model for appropriate support and intervention by the Government. Where it is required, as is the case in this instance and other instances of formal escalation, a detailed improvement plan is produced by the relevant territorial board, and a tailored support package is agreed to underpin that improvement plan, with progress against that overseen by Government. The framework is overseen by the national planning and performance oversight group, which is a sub-group of the Government's health and social care management board.

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): Will the minister answer the question that he deftly failed to answer from Tess White? What, specifically, will

the trigger point be to escalate this failing health board to stage 5?

Neil Gray: That point is kept under review. Performance against the escalation and support that are provided under stage 4 is clearly kept under review. Should we not see significant progress, stage 5 remains an intervention of choice.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the ministerial statement on NHS Grampian.

Reinforced Autoclaved Aerated Concrete (Public Sector)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a statement by Ivan McKee on responding to reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete in the public sector across Scotland. The minister will take questions at the end of his statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

15:56

The Minister for Public Finance (Ivan McKee): I am pleased to provide Parliament with an update on the work that has been going on across the public sector to identify and manage reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete, or RAAC, as it is better known.

Where RAAC has been used in Scotland, it has typically been for roofs in different types of buildings, with only limited use in walls and floors. RAAC started to be used in the 1950s and continued to be used through to the 1980s. There is currently no manufacturing in Scotland or in the rest of the United Kingdom, and it is no longer used here. However, it is still manufactured and used in other countries, including Germany, South Korea and Mexico.

In response to emerging concerns across the sector, a working group was formed in the summer of 2023. The group pulled together people from across Scotland with an interest in RAAC, including professional advisers and academics, to ensure that knowledge, understanding and best practice could be shared. RAAC is not just a Scottish issue, of course; it is also present across England and Wales, with engagement taking place between the Scottish Government and other Governments on the topic.

RAAC came to public prominence in late August 2023, following the UK Government Department for Education's decision to change its approach to risk with regard to RAAC in schools in England. Work had already been undertaken in Scotland by that time, particularly in the health, justice and school sectors.

The Institution of Structural Engineers notes that properly maintained RAAC should perform no differently to any other comparable building material. It may remain serviceable and does not need to be removed simply because it is RAAC. The cross-sector working group has heard from experts and professional bodies who have refuted claims such as those about the limited 30-year lifespan of RAAC. If RAAC has been properly manufactured, specified, installed and maintained, it can continue to fulfil its function in the long term.

If RAAC is not properly maintained, it can deteriorate and will need to be managed appropriately. That may include on-going monitoring, remediation or replacement. The Scottish Government advises building owners to use the guidance produced by the Institution of Structural Engineers for assessment.

We continue to urge building owners with RAAC to seek appropriate professional advice and follow the guidance. My thanks go to everyone who has engaged with us to allow an understanding of RAAC across the public sector in Scotland. It is only with that engagement that we have been able to develop the complete picture.

A total of 40 schools were found to have RAAC, and that number is now down to 29. A number of those schools will be replaced through the £2 billion learning estate investment programme. Schools that still have RAAC are taking appropriate measures to manage it and have longer-term plans to address it.

Our national health service estate has also been affected. Members will no doubt be aware of the work to remove RAAC at Knoll hospital in the Borders. Fifty other NHS properties were found to have RAAC. Some of those buildings, such as Denburn health centre in Aberdeen, were due to be vacated before RAAC was discovered. NHS Scotland Assure is working with NHS boards to further assess the condition of RAAC to allow a national programme to be developed. Patient and staff safety has not been compromised because of RAAC. Where areas have had to be closed, services have been provided from elsewhere. Nothing is more important than the safety of patients and staff in our NHS.

There has undoubtedly been a considerable focus on housing. In Scotland, local authorities, social landlords and the Scottish Housing Regulator have undertaken a comprehensive assessment of their stock. Although the vast majority of social landlords do not have RAAC, there are about 3,000 homes, around 1,000 of which are privately owned, that do have it. I am pleased with the progress that social landlords are making to assess and remediate RAAC, where required, and to manage properties in the longer term.

The housing sub-group on RAAC brings together Scottish Government officials, social landlords and other professionals to share best practice and to test approaches to RAAC management. My colleague the Minister for Housing, and his officials have engaged closely with local authorities as they have addressed the issue of RAAC in the various council areas. They have also met the Association of British Insurers and have engaged with UK Finance and with residents groups.

I encourage lenders and insurers to treat homeowners fairly and ask that they consider the condition of any RAAC, rather than just responding to the fact that there is RAAC in a property. Mortgage lenders and insurers must pay heed to the ISE guidance, just as building owners do.

Earlier this month, the Minister for Housing met with residents in Aberdeen who are affected by RAAC to hear their concerns directly. He also heard some of the alternative solutions they have been proposing to councils. A visit to meet similarly affected residents in Dundee is also being arranged.

The Scottish Government remains committed to supporting local authorities with flexibilities within their existing budgets. They are responsible for supporting housing in their areas, for example through the scheme of assistance in place to help homeowners. It is for each local authority to decide the support that it will make available, based on its resources and local priorities.

Having said that, each area is different and what one local authority is doing to address RAAC may not be appropriate for another, not only because of the number of properties affected but because of the condition of the RAAC. In North Lanarkshire for example, due to the low number of affected properties, the local authority is making grants to help homeowners cover their costs. Meanwhile, Dundee and Edinburgh are carrying out pilots to provide a permanent solution to concerns about RAAC without removing it and incurring significant costs. We are ready to work with any local authority to develop solutions to address residents' concerns.

To assist landlords and owners, I am also pleased to confirm that the Institution of Structural Engineers, with support from the Scottish Government, is currently developing guidance that is specific to RAAC in domestic properties. That guidance will include potential ways to effectively support any RAAC in situ or, where that is not possible, advice on how it can safely be removed. We expect that guidance to be published in the summer. The Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors will also publish a consumer guide shortly.

The approaches being taken reflect what I said earlier. RAAC is not a fundamentally defective material and, if it is in good condition, it can be managed and remain in situ for many years. The Scottish Government will not be imposing a deadline for the removal of RAAC from public buildings. Rather, it is for those with RAAC to manage their estates as they consider necessary, taking their priorities into account.

Since RAAC first came to prominence almost two years ago, the Scottish Government has repeatedly called on the UK Government to make a dedicated RAAC remediation fund available, but so far that has not been forthcoming. We have written again, ahead of the UK Government spending review, to repeat that call.

Taking learning from the issue of RAAC into account, we are establishing a cross-sector building safety forum with external stakeholders to work to identify potential future safety issues. The forum, which is made up of representatives from across the public sector, met for the first time last week and will report to the ministerial working group on building and fire safety.

I thank all those who have been involved in identifying, managing and addressing concerns caused by RAAC. Although there are, undoubtedly, still issues to address, we have a far greater understanding of RAAC across the public sector in Scotland. Where RAAC has been found, building managers will have taken appropriate steps to ensure the safety of buildings and users.

Finally, anyone who has a building with RAAC should seek professional advice and follow the appropriate guidance.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The minister will now take questions on the issues raised in his statement. I intend to allow around 20 minutes for those questions, after which we will move on to the next item of business. Members who wish to put a question should press their request-to-speak buttons.

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): I thank the minister for advance sight of his statement.

Despite knowing for years that RAAC presents a serious safety risk, the Scottish National Party has failed to take action to address the issue. While councils face mounting repair bills to fix RAAC in public buildings, local government budgets have been cut year on year.

At the same time as politicians prioritise the debate on the use of toilets at Holyrood, thousands of homeowners who have been forced out of their homes are having to make mortgage payments on properties that they cannot access, while the value of those properties plummets.

In Aberdeen, SNP councillors refused to commit funding for RAAC repairs, which means that affected homeowners will have to shell out thousands for a new roof or see their home demolished. It is a complete injustice that, through no fault of their own, homeowners in RAAC-affected properties find themselves living in defective homes with little to no resale value. Does the minister think that that is an acceptable

situation for homeowners to be in? Why will the SNP not step in, at either local or national level, to support people who are affected by the scandal?

Ivan McKee: First, given the situation in which we find ourselves—and, more importantly, that in which homeowners find themselves—it is not helpful for the member to scaremonger to that extent. As I indicated in my statement—and the member should know this if she is familiar with the issue—RAAC is not necessarily a problem if it is properly maintained; it depends on the findings of the risk assessments that are undertaken. Professional advice from the Institution of Structural Engineers and others points to that important fact.

On the funding aspects, the Government has given local authorities a record settlement in this year's budget. We continue to engage with affected local authorities to understand how we can best work with them to provide support as necessary. It is also worth reflecting that, although the RAAC issue affects properties across the UK, the Conservative Government formerly in power at Westminster refused to put in place a financial support scheme for affected homeowners.

I urge the member to tone down her language and focus on the facts when addressing the issue.

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): Across Scotland, lives have been turned upside down by problems with RAAC in homes. It is not scaremongering to say that some people are stuck in unsaleable and unsafe properties, and others have been forced to move out, leaving their possessions behind. Expressing concern is not good enough. People are desperate for action to secure their homes. Given that responsibility for housing is fully devolved, will the Scottish Government mark the scale of the crisis and respond to the call for a remediation scheme, as the Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland recommended?

Ivan McKee: We recognise the impact of the current situation on homeowners, which is why we continue to engage with local authorities.

As I indicated earlier, the Minister for Housing has met residents, and will continue to do so, to understand and address the challenges. That is why we are working with interested parties in the cross-sector working group on the issue. It is why we are engaging with the Institution of Structural Engineers and the RICS on developing guidance to support homeowners. It is also why we are engaging with the Association of British Insurers and others on issues concerning insurance and mortgage payments, to support owners and ensure that such issues are addressed. We will continue to do so, because we recognise the challenges that they face.

It is also worth noting that the current UK Government—a Labour Government—to which my Scottish Government colleagues have written on a number of occasions, has refused to engage on the matter of putting in place a remediation scheme, in recognition of the fact that this is a UK-wide problem.

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): The previous UK Government committed to “spend what it takes” to deal with remediating RAAC. However, the Conservatives did not deliver a remediation fund, and, so far, Labour has failed to deliver the financial support that is needed. *[Interruption.]* I know that some Conservatives might not want to hear that, but they know that it is the truth. Does the minister share my concern that the UK Government's inaction has slowed down the process of addressing the problems with RAAC that have been experienced across the UK?

Ivan McKee: Yes. It is a case of a promise not being honoured by the previous UK Government or, indeed, the current one. That is why Scottish ministers have written to and engaged with the UK Government on numerous occasions since the RAAC issue came to prominence. It is important to note that RAAC is a UK-wide issue, so we would expect the UK Government to support a UK-wide approach. It is frustrating that, having created the circumstances in which we find ourselves, the UK Government is resisting our calls to address the challenges and make things right.

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): In September last year, the Scottish Government published a report on RAAC in the public sector, which said that, in the NHS estate, it was likely that the number of buildings containing RAAC had fluctuated from 395 initially to 560. Today, we were told that 50 buildings definitely have it. Is that number likely to go up? Can the minister explain why he did not mention the Police Scotland estate, the courts estate, the Scottish Water estate, colleges or prisons in his statement?

Ivan McKee: I identified in my statement that a number of public sector buildings are involved. I did not list them all, but, if Graham Simpson is interested in the details, I am happy to share that information.

Work continues across the sectors that Graham Simpson identified—including health, education, justice and the wider public sector—to identify affected buildings and to do technical risk assessments to understand the scope and the condition of the RAAC. As I said, just because a building has RAAC in it does not mean that action necessarily needs to be taken. Once that process, which is proceeding at pace, is completed, it is for the specific public body to take a perspective on what needs to be done to address the issue. In

some cases, that has involved demolition of buildings and their replacement. In others, it has involved temporary closure. In others, the result of the risk assessment is such that no action needs to be taken. That depends on the specifics of the building, and it is the responsibility of the public body to address the issue. As I said in my statement, the safety of public sector workers and the users of the buildings is of paramount concern.

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): Can the minister update the Parliament on engagement between the Scottish Government and local authorities regarding steps that are being taken to remove RAAC in local authority buildings?

Ivan McKee: We will continue to engage with local authorities, including Aberdeen City Council, in that regard. I indicated in my statement that the work and approach that local authorities undertake will depend on local circumstances. Scottish Government ministers will continue to engage with local authorities and support them where we can to address that hugely significant issue.

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): It is disappointing that the Scottish Government does not recognise its own role and responsibility in this regard, as housing is a devolved policy area.

I understand that the home report system is under review at the moment. Is there scope for that review to include the condition of RAAC and information on RAAC?

Ivan McKee: The review of the home report system will be evidence led, so, if there is evidence that suggests that it would be beneficial to include RAAC, it will be considered as part of the review. I am happy to engage with Claire Baker separately on that specific issue. If anyone else has a professional or other interest in what should be included in the home report review, my ministerial colleagues would be happy to engage, as appropriate, on the specifics.

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): I am grateful to the Minister for Housing for his engagement with me on the RAAC situation that is impacting about 500 council and privately owned houses in my constituency. I am also grateful for his recent engagement with community representatives to discuss the situation that is impacting private home owners and to hear at first hand about the devastating impact that the issue has had on the community.

Although the focus of today's statement is the public sector, the Torry case highlights the complexities that arise in responding to RAAC when former council housing stock has been sold and is now in private ownership. The Scottish Government has previously indicated that fiscal

flexibility is an option that is available to councils, including Aberdeen City Council, to finance their responses to RAAC. Can the minister advise whether that is still the case?

Ivan McKee: When local authorities come to us with solutions that require flexibility in existing funding settlements, we are more than willing to consider them. I know that Aberdeen City Council has sent a proposal for using the housing infrastructure fund. Housing officials are currently appraising that proposal and will reply shortly, once we have given it full consideration.

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): More than 1,400 homes in the north-east—many of which are council owned—are affected by RAAC. However, councils still do not have accurate numbers of all affected properties because, despite requests from residents, the surveys that are required to confirm the presence of RAAC are not always being undertaken. What assurances can the minister give to residents that councils will undertake those required surveys in a systematic way, and how can he ensure that communities are included in discussions about financially viable and family and community-appropriate solutions?

Ivan McKee: Councils have a responsibility to assess such properties, and we are working with them to ensure that that happens as rapidly as possible. Clearly, there are a number of properties to be addressed, but that work is on-going and the information is becoming available.

We are content to engage with local authorities and, importantly, with affected residents. As I already indicated, my colleague the Minister for Housing met affected residents to discuss the issue, and we will continue to do that to ensure that their perspectives are properly heard.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): Members will recall that I was the first in the chamber to raise the problem with RAAC, some two years ago at First Minister's question time. Almost every month since that occasion, I have raised the issue. I always ask that the Government recognises its responsibility, to local authorities in particular, to make whole those buildings, such as Blackhall library in my constituency and many schools around the country, so that local authorities are not left scrabbling around for cash.

Does the cabinet secretary's statement suggest that there is no fund coming? If so, what does he have to say to the local authorities that have been looking to his Government for money?

Ivan McKee: On the issue of funding, as I have indicated in answer to previous questions and in my statement, we will continue to engage with local authorities to explore the financial flexibilities

that are available to allow them to support homeowners and others appropriately.

I have indicated, too, that different local authorities are impacted to a different extent and are handling their circumstances in different ways. It is important to take that into account.

We continue to engage with local authorities. I have cited the case of Aberdeen, where we are having detailed discussions about the potential use of the housing infrastructure fund and the fiscal flexibilities around that.

I again call on the UK Government to put in place a UK-wide fund to provide support across the UK. The previous UK Government committed to do so, and the current UK Government should follow through on that.

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): Will the minister provide an update on the work of the RAAC cross-sector working group and say how it can support the sharing of learning and best practice in the response by public bodies to RAAC?

Ivan McKee: The cross-sector working group on RAAC was established just prior to the UK Government's decision to close schools because of the condition of RAAC. The group brings together public bodies that are affected by RAAC, along with professional advisers and academics. It has created a network where relevant current information can be shared. For example, the Institution of Structural Engineers noted that there is no evidence to support the oft-quoted 30-year lifespan of RAAC.

More recently, the focus has been on housing, with the housing sub-group meeting regularly. Most recently, the group heard a presentation on potential solutions to issues with RAAC that do not require a full roof replacement. Lessons learned from the RAAC working group have been taken forward with the establishment of the cross-sector building safety forum, whose remit is to consider current and emerging building safety issues. If anyone is interested, minutes of all meetings of cross-sector working groups, including sub-groups, are on the Scottish Government website.

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): Despite the minister's amnesia, £95 million in Barnett consequential for RAAC remediation was given to the Government, but it was absorbed into the Scottish Government's general revenue budget rather than being earmarked specifically for addressing the RAAC crisis. That implies that, now, remedial works can proceed only at a pace that the Government can afford rather than based on urgency. Given the safety concerns and the substantial costs faced by local authorities, what steps will the minister take to ensure that that

dedicated funding is restored? In other words, where has the RAAC money gone?

Ivan McKee: I stand to be corrected, but, as far as I and my colleagues on the front bench are aware, no specific RAAC fund has come to the Scottish Government from the UK Government. We will double check what the member has said to verify that and will respond accordingly. To the best of our recollection, there is no specific fund for RAAC from the UK Government.

Indeed, had there been such a fund, it would have been very easy for the UK Government—either the previous Conservative Government or the current Labour Government—to respond to the letters that we wrote to it and make that point. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear the minister.

Ivan McKee: That is, if that had been the case, the UK Government would not have been slow to come back and point that out to us. The member is perhaps a bit confused in that regard.

I reiterate our call that the UK Government should, as was promised previously, step up to the plate and implement a funding solution to support the remediation of RAAC across the UK.

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): On that point, much has been said today about the UK national remediation fund. The minister will be aware that the UK RAAC campaign group has been calling for a national remediation fund to be provided by the UK Government. What assessment has the minister made of the campaign group's calls?

Ivan McKee: As I have indicated, we are very supportive of calls for a UK-wide remediation fund. We are aware of the calls that have been made by the UK RAAC campaign group. A petition on the issue is also being considered by the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee, and the Minister for Housing is fully engaged with the committee as it considers that petition.

We have every sympathy for homeowners who are affected by RAAC. As I said in my statement, we have written several times to the UK Government calling for a RAAC fund to be established to provide support to those who are affected. I call on the UK Government to make such a fund available as part of the upcoming UK spending review.

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): In his statement today, the minister has called for insurers and mortgage lenders "to treat home owners fairly". Will he also instruct the SNP administration and Aberdeen City Council to treat homeowners fairly by improving the derisory offers that have been made to homeowners in Torry?

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The minister can answer only on questions for which he has devolved responsibility. If he wishes to address the question in that regard, he may do so.

Ivan McKee: I will reiterate what I have said. The Scottish Government continues to engage with Aberdeen City Council and councils across the country to discuss the financial flexibilities that can be afforded through funds that are available to support homeowners. We will continue to do that.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the ministerial statement.

Craig Hoy: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I seek to put this on the record and to find out from you how the record can be corrected. A freedom of information release last year revealed that

“The Scottish Government received £97.1 million in Barnett consequentials following the UK Government’s announcement in March 2020 to remediate”

non-aluminium composite material—non-ACM—cladding systems

“on residential buildings ... where leaseholders would incur the costs or where the costs were a threat to the financial stability of the social housing provider.”

I mistook that cladding system for RAAC, so I would like to correct the record.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Hoy, for that clarification. It is not a point of order, but it is on the record.

Tobacco and Vapes Bill

The Presiding Officer: The next item of business is consideration of legislative consent motion S6M-17708, in the name of Jenni Minto, on the Tobacco and Vapes Bill, which is United Kingdom legislation. I call Jenni Minto to speak to and move the motion.

16:22

The Minister for Public Health and Women’s Health (Jenni Minto): To put the Tobacco and Vapes Bill in context, around 9,000 people a year die from tobacco-related illnesses in Scotland. Each one of those people is a loved one—a family member—whose life has been shortened through tobacco addiction.

The Tobacco and Vapes Bill is about preventing young people from becoming hooked on tobacco by keeping them from starting to use tobacco and creating a tobacco-free Scotland by 2034. Scotland has a range of world-leading tobacco control measures. We were the first country to introduce a ban on smoking in indoor public places, in March 2006.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees that the relevant provisions of the Tobacco and Vapes Bill, introduced in the House of Commons on 5 November 2024, and subsequently amended relating to age verification in relation to tobacco and vaping products etc, so far as these matters fall within the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament and alter the executive competence of the Scottish Ministers, should be considered by the UK Parliament.

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

Motion without Notice

16:24

The Presiding Officer: I am minded to accept a motion without notice, under rule 11.2.4 of standing orders, that decision time be brought forward to now. I invite Lorna Slater to move such a motion.

Motion moved,

That, under Rule 11.2.4, Decision Time be brought forward to 4:23 pm.—[*Lorna Slater*]

Motion agreed to.

Decision Time

16:23

The Presiding Officer: There is one question to be put as a result of today's business.

The question is, that S6M-17708, in the name of Jenni Minto, on a legislative consent motion on the Tobacco and Vapes Bill, which is United Kingdom legislation, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the relevant provisions of the Tobacco and Vapes Bill, introduced in the House of Commons on 5 November 2024, and subsequently amended relating to age verification in relation to tobacco and vaping products etc, so far as these matters fall within the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament and alter the executive competence of the Scottish Ministers, should be considered by the UK Parliament.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Meeting closed at 16:24.

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The deadline for corrections to this edition is:

Thursday 26 June 2025

Published in Edinburgh by the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body, the Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP

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