



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Meeting of the Parliament

Thursday 5 June 2025

Session 6



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

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Scottish Parliament

Thursday 5 June 2025

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

General Question Time

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

A720 Sheriffhall Roundabout

1. **Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the progress of the A720 Sheriffhall roundabout project. (S6O-04760)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): We continue to progress the proposed improvements at Sheriffhall through the statutory process. Given the large number of objections received following publication of the draft orders, a public local inquiry was held between 31 January and 8 February 2023. The independent reporter's conclusions and recommendations have been submitted to the Scottish Government and are under active consideration prior to advice being provided to Scottish ministers, who will then decide whether the statutory process should be completed.

Colin Beattie: It is coming up to two years since the independent reporter submitted her conclusions to ministers. Can the cabinet secretary confirm whether the money allocated previously is still ring fenced and, given cost inflation, whether it is still adequate to meet the construction costs?

Fiona Hyslop: I assure Colin Beattie that the Government remains committed to the Edinburgh and south-east Scotland city region deal, which includes up to £120 million for grade separation at Sheriffhall roundabout. The financial risk for any cost over and above that figure lies with Scottish ministers.

As is the case for all other road infrastructure projects, the cost estimate will be updated once the statutory process has been completed and in advance of procurement. Funding to progress the construction stage will be determined as part of the annual Scottish budget-setting exercises.

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): This week, I launched a campaign so that people across Lothian can make their voices heard about this notorious junction. After 20 years of discussion and the spending of more than £6 million on

consultation fees, we are no further forward. Motorists across Lothian have had enough of the delays. Can the cabinet secretary confirm that the project will be given the green light before the next Scottish Parliament election?

Fiona Hyslop: Although we are keen to see the improvements being delivered as soon as possible, the statutory right for individuals to have their say on proposals cannot be set aside. I am sure that the Conservatives would want the statutory processes for a number of projects to be concluded quickly. In this case, I have yet to receive the advice on the reporter's recommendations, but the timetable for decision making and dealing with any implications for the budget process can be made thereafter.

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): I am not surprised that Miles Briggs has launched such a campaign—had he not, I would probably have done so myself. My constituents in the Borders and Midlothian have to use that junction all the time—as do I, because it connects to the A68 and the A7 in my constituency. I add my own concerns about the delay to the project going ahead, because it will only become more costly the longer that the delay continues.

Fiona Hyslop: I acknowledge the concerns raised by Christine Grahame and other members. The proposed new flyover arrangement at Sheriffhall would separate local traffic, including public transport, from strategic traffic on the Edinburgh city bypass. It would improve traffic flow on the bypass at that location, which would in turn improve road safety and journey times for users. In addition, the proposed new active travel facilities would provide cyclists and pedestrians with their own safer, dedicated alternative routes, by removing the existing barrier and transforming the way across the A720.

However, I remind members that 2,773 objections to the proposals were received. Advice on the matter will come to me once the Scottish Government has completed its analysis of the reporter's recommendations. Although we have received those, I have yet to receive the subsequent advice. When I receive that, I will deal with it.

Housing (Scotland) Bill (Homelessness Prevention)

2. **Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government, in relation to part 5 of the Housing (Scotland) Bill, when the homelessness prevention pilots will commence. (S6O-04761)

The Minister for Housing (Paul McLennan): The procurement exercise to appoint the grant fund manager for the homelessness prevention

pilots is under way. The contract is due to be awarded by 1 July 2025, and we expect the fund to open for bids shortly after that. Relevant bodies and their consortia partners that wish to participate in prevention pilots will be encouraged to apply.

Jeremy Balfour: Parliament will be asked to pass a bill that includes provisions that were meant to be informed by those pilots. However, it now seems that the pilots will not have started by the time the bill comes to stage 3 proceedings in the chamber. Does the minister accept that that represents a failure of planning on the part of the Scottish Government? What value does he think that the pilots will provide, given that they will conclude far too late for MSPs to change anything in the bill?

Paul McLennan: I do not share Mr Balfour's view. It is important to remember that this is a £4 million investment by the Scottish Government. The pilots are very important for the success of the duties under the bill, so we would rather take our time and get it right. We have worked very closely—as has Mr Balfour—with Crisis and other stakeholders on that point. How we shape the development of the pilots is important, and the expected outcomes will be important, too. Obviously, there will be learning throughout the duration of the pilots, and we will continue to learn as we develop the bill.

Employer National Insurance Contributions (Third Sector)

3. Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on any engagement it has had with the United Kingdom Government regarding the impact of the increase to employer national insurance contributions on the third sector in Scotland. (S6O-04762)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Shona Robison): This Government has consistently made the case to the UK Government to fully fund the additional costs to public services of its increase in employer national insurance contributions. Those services include the vital services that third sector organisations provide. The Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations has highlighted that the increase will cost the voluntary sector in Scotland around £75 million and put those organisations in a very challenging situation.

Jackie Dunbar: A local charity has told me that Labour's short-sighted hike to employer national insurance contributions will cost that charity a staggering £450,000. That funding could support vital local services. Does the cabinet secretary share my concern about the impact of Labour's tax hike on the voluntary sector in Scotland? Does

she agree that the UK Government should reverse it as a matter of priority?

Shona Robison: I agree with that. I am deeply concerned about the impact of the increase on charities and other third sector organisations. As I said, I have made that clear to the UK Government on several occasions.

Last month, the UK Government confirmed that we would receive £339 million this year for the additional cost, which is less than half the estimated cost to public services of more than £700 million. It is unacceptable that the Chancellor of the Exchequer has failed to protect those organisations from the costs of the reserved tax rise. In February, this Parliament voted to call on the UK Government to reverse the tax hike. The chancellor must listen and take action.

Families in Temporary Accommodation

4. Foyso Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on how it is working to reduce the average time families spend in temporary accommodation. (S6O-04763)

The Minister for Housing (Paul McLennan): Increasing affordable housing supply is the best way to reduce time in temporary accommodation. We have provided £80 million through our voids and acquisitions fund last year and this year to increase the supply of social and affordable homes. Eighty per cent of that funding has been targeted to the five local authorities facing the most sustained temporary accommodation pressures.

An estimated 2,669 households with children have been helped into affordable housing in the year ending December 2024. The most recent statistics show that 20 councils have reduced the number of children in temporary accommodation.

Foyso Choudhury: Constituents frequently contact me about waits with children in unsuitable temporary accommodation lasting years. We are now seeing a concerning rise in the number of children housed in hostels and bed and breakfasts. Given that Scottish National Party members voted down amendments from my colleague Mark Griffin to require consideration of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child when allocating temporary accommodation, how can the Scottish Government say that it is serious about ending the housing emergency and stopping the unacceptable increase in the number of children being housed in B and Bs?

Paul McLennan: There are a number of points to make. First, I mentioned the £80 million of funding this year and last year. That included £14

million in Foysoil Choudhury's region last year and £14 million this year.

We have also taken other actions, such as taking a targeted approach in five local authority areas, including Edinburgh. Edinburgh has seen a 50 per cent reduction in voids, and I thank the City of Edinburgh Council for its work on that. We are working with the local authority on the issue.

It is also important to consider the prevention duties under the Housing (Scotland) Bill, which Mr Balfour mentioned. Only last week, the cabinet secretary and I met registered social landlords to talk about their role in that.

We are taking a number of actions to reduce the numbers. As I said, the most recent statistics show that 20 local authorities have reduced the number of children who are in temporary accommodation.

“A Just Transition for Aberdeen and the North East”

5. Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to the recently published report by the Just Transition Commission, “A Just Transition for Aberdeen and the North East”. (S6O-04764)

The Acting Minister for Climate Action (Alasdair Allan): We welcome the report from the Just Transition Commission. As I set out in my statement on Tuesday, we accept the headline recommendations in principle. Before doing further planning, we first need clarity on the United Kingdom Government's intentions in a range of key reserved areas, including the future regulatory and fiscal regimes for North Sea oil and gas and support for the Acorn carbon capture and storage project.

Aside from planning, the Scottish Government is taking action. We will continue to provide support to the region, including through the new £8.5 million round of the just transition fund for the north-east and Moray.

Maggie Chapman: During Tuesday's ministerial statement on a just transition, the minister did not mention communities or answer my question about community benefit and community participation in planning. Will he say today how communities can expect to benefit from the collective commons that are our renewables as we harness them for the future? How will communities genuinely be involved in the planning, which must happen with urgency?

Alasdair Allan: Communities are important, and I attempted to touch on that issue in my statement. On the member's point about community benefit, I think that she might be talking about onshore developments. The Scottish Government is in touch with the UK Government—

because the issue of mandating community benefits is reserved—about ensuring that communities are the mandatory recipients of benefits in the future.

The Presiding Officer: Question 6 was not lodged.

ScotRail Drivers (Recruitment and Training)

7. Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on ScotRail driver recruitment and training programmes, in light of reports of previous service reductions being attributed to staffing shortages. (S6O-04766)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): We have worked hard in Scotland to ensure that employers are in a position to table and negotiate a fair and affordable settlement on pay. I am pleased that the Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen accepted a multiyear pay offer for train drivers that meets inflation and gives drivers and their families security for the next two years.

ScotRail is taking steps to eradicate its reliance on rest-day and overtime working, which is all too common in the rail industry. With 160 drivers recruited per year, its recruitment is at a record level that is higher than that of any other operator in Britain.

Those highly skilled jobs require a carefully delivered training programme before recruited candidates can perform their roles safely. The number of trainee drivers is limited by ScotRail's ability to safely deliver practical handling experience at any one time without disrupting service provision. With the efforts made on recruitment and training, ScotRail expects to see improvements in reliability from autumn this year.

Rona Mackay: Last summer, ScotRail removed Bishopbriggs and Lenzie from the Edinburgh service due to driver shortages, which significantly impacted commuters in my constituency. Will the minister confirm whether driver numbers have now recovered sufficiently to prevent a repeat of such timetable reductions, and whether full service retention is planned for those stations?

Fiona Hyslop: The previous temporary timetable related to historical issues of driver availability and was lifted in early October last year. ScotRail is working hard to address that historical issue, which was inherited from the previous private sector franchisees, by recruiting drivers, as I mentioned, in order to have full availability on all routes.

Last summer, industrial action restricted the availability of drivers who chose not to work their

rest day, as is their right. That also affected timetables.

The process of training drivers is complex, and ScotRail is also dealing with significant staff attrition as drivers reach their retirement age. ScotRail has a robust recruitment process in place that will improve driver availability even further, including for stations at Lenzie and Bishopbriggs. I recognise the member's constituency interest in the routes that she specified.

Local Heat and Energy Efficiency Strategies

8. Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what support it is giving to local authorities to enable them to implement their local heat and energy efficiency strategies. (S6O-04767)

The Acting Minister for Climate Action (Alasdair Allan): We are committed to supporting local authorities to deliver their LHEES and are continuously seeking their input on the process of doing so. The Scottish Government is providing £2.4 million per annum to local authorities to use at their discretion to support LHEES development and implementation. Zero Waste Scotland is also delivering capacity building to local authorities that is focused on LHEES implementation. In addition, we have committed more than £815,000 of grant funding to local authorities through our heat network support unit to take forward heat network opportunities.

Sarah Boyack: Given the financial investment that is required, what additional financial support and advice will the Scottish Government give councils to enable them to develop not-for-profit heat networks, which have had huge success in Denmark over decades? Will there be specific financial support for regional networks, so that councils can maximise the benefits from heat networks and renewable generation?

Alasdair Allan: As I mentioned, there is ongoing support from the Scottish Government in a number of those areas. The Scottish Government is committed to developing heat networks as a key part of the way in which we will decarbonise our country in the future.

As I mentioned, we have funded Zero Waste Scotland to provide capacity building in support of local authorities. It is also worth pointing out that, in Edinburgh—which will be of interest to the member—the council has recently utilised its funding to further refine the zones that are identified in its LHEES and to seek legal counsel on the most appropriate delivery model to bring heat networks to market.

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): One of the challenges with local heat and energy efficiency strategies is that they cross local

authority areas. What support is the Scottish Government giving across borders to local authorities so that they can work together on local heat strategies? How can that be advanced at a quicker pace than is happening at the moment?

Alasdair Allan: The member is right to point out that some of these issues cross local authority boundaries. We work with local authorities to ensure that co-operation is there. We know that there is a particular enthusiasm around heat network development. We have information on grant funding that is allocated via the heat network support unit equating to more than £815,000, to support the development of city-wide, town-wide or cross-local-authority heat networks.

I encourage the member to contact the Scottish Government if he requires anything related to his local area. Co-operation is being promoted by the Scottish Government.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes general question time.

11:57

Meeting suspended.

12:00

On resuming—

First Minister's Question Time

Gangland Violence

1. Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): In recent weeks, we have witnessed a sickening outbreak of gangland violence across the country. Two Scottish drug dealers have now been shot dead in Spain. Their gang has waged a turf war on Scotland's streets since the dawn of devolution, which has mutated to include proxy groups, including the US-sanctioned Kinahan cartel. Those parasites grow rich by preying on society's most vulnerable. Those cowards cause terror and death with guns, knives and firebombs. Those thugs go after journalists, politicians, businessmen, police and prison officers. Organised crime is out of control and communities are living in fear. Does John Swinney accept that the Scottish Parliament has failed to tackle organised crime in Scotland?

The First Minister (John Swinney): There was an awful lot in what Mr Findlay said with which I agree. Organised crime is intolerable and unacceptable. It requires the forensic attention of our police and criminal justice authorities to tackle it. That is being undertaken in Scotland relentlessly by Police Scotland and by the criminal justice authorities. I expect the authorities to pursue that level of scrutiny and activity, which is what is happening. However, I do not agree with Mr Findlay's conclusion.

Russell Findlay: John Swinney says that he agrees about the seriousness of organised crime, but, under successive Scottish National Party and Labour Governments, organised crime has rarely been on the agenda. It was not even mentioned in the Scottish Government's flagship five-year justice strategy—not even once. I got into politics because I could not understand why politicians do not talk about the malevolent reach and devastating harm of organised crime.

Local front-line policing is absolutely critical. The Scottish Police Federation has said:

"The bottom line is the intelligence on organised crime groups ... and terrorism comes from the communities. If you don't have community police officers out there patrolling and picking up on that intelligence, then they're missing out on so much."

However, under the SNP, officer numbers have fallen by nearly 1,000. Does John Swinney accept front-line officers' view that his Government's decision to reduce police numbers inevitably fuels organised crime?

The First Minister: There are quite a number of flaws in the argument that Russell Findlay has put forward. The first flaw is that a very high number of

participants in organised crime activity are currently incarcerated for a very long time in Scotland's jails, which is contributing to the significant congestion in our prison system.

One of the operational challenges for the Scottish Prison Service—which is why I admire its work so strongly—is that it has to ensure that our prisons remain safe internally. A number of members of organised crime groups are housed in our prisons, and they cannot be housed together, as that would risk the internal stability in our prisons. That is the type of focused work that the Scottish Prison Service is taking forward.

The second flaw in Mr Findlay's argument is in the fact that this Government established the Scottish crime campus, which is viewed across the world as one of the most innovative and successful measures in bringing together all the intelligence gathering services—whether that is Police Scotland, the National Crime Agency or the United Kingdom's enforcement authorities—in one place. Indeed, it is visited by people from around the world, because it is a leader.

The third thing is that Mr Findlay said that we never talk about these things. Three times a year, the Government brings together the serious organised crime task force, which involves local authorities, the national health service, Police Scotland, the National Crime Agency, His Majesty's Revenue and Customs and various other organisations, to ensure that we tackle the issue. Indeed, the serious organised crime strategy was published in February 2022, updating the actions that the Government is taking.

Russell Findlay: The First Minister talks about the prisons being safe—tell that to the 10 prison officers whose cars have been firebombed outside Scotland's prisons by organised crime gangs that are fighting for control of the drugs trade inside Scotland's prisons. There is a dangerous complacency to this Government's approach.

We need to stop crime bosses exploiting vulnerable young people. The two men who were shot dead in Spain were groomed for a life of crime. Most of their gang associates are dead or in prison, and now there is an official policy in place that makes young people even more vulnerable to exploitation. Senior Police Scotland officers say that under-25 sentencing guidelines are part of the problem. Detective Superintendent Andy Patrick said:

"Organised crime groups are exploiting this policy. They are coercing young and vulnerable people to carry out some of these crimes because they're under reduced risk of imprisonment."

Will John Swinney rethink his Government's support of those damaging guidelines?

The First Minister: Not for the first time, Presiding Officer, I cannot allow Mr Findlay's remarks about the under-25 sentencing guidelines to stand. It is misleading to say to members of the public that there are no consequences for criminal activity by those under the age of 25, because there are. There are very serious consequences, which involve imprisonment. We cannot have messages being issued from this Parliament that indicate that there are no consequences for serious criminal activity, because there are, no matter the age of the individual who is involved. We as a Parliament cannot have a situation in which we do not properly represent what the law and the sentencing guidelines state, because people could take the wrong conclusions from that.

Mr Findlay has made a number of remarks about the shootings that took place in Spain in recent days. Those are live police investigations, so I am not able to comment on the particular issues that are being pursued by the Spanish authorities. However, I say to Parliament that any individual who is involved in criminal activity, no matter their age, must be aware of the severity of the punishments that exist. That is the right position for people to hear from this Parliament.

Russell Findlay: John Swinney appears to be hearing things—I said no such thing.

We have top-level crime bosses making millions of pounds from killing vulnerable Scots with their drugs. We were told that the Mr Bigs would be bankrupted by the proceeds of crime law that was passed at the start of devolution, but the law has failed. Criminals and their white-collar enablers no longer fear the proceeds of crime legislation, and, 18 months ago, the SNP rejected my call to review why that is not working.

According to the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service, one drug dealer made more than £126 million, but it can find only £118,000-worth of his assets. The proceeds of crime legislation needs an urgent and radical overhaul. We must turn the tables on the drug gangs so that they live in fear. Will John Swinney toughen the legislation to make it fit to tackle organised crime in 2025 and beyond?

The First Minister: I am open to ensuring that we have in place the correct legislative framework to deal with criminality in our country. That is why the Government brings forward legislation. Mr Findlay is making suggestions about an area of policy that could be considered for strengthening. I am perfectly willing to consider that, because I do not want anybody to benefit from criminal activity in our society, and I want people to be punished accordingly.

The Government will always keep legislation under review, but it has to be acknowledged that our criminal justice authorities, the police and the Crown Office have been successful in apprehending, imprisoning, interrupting and disrupting organised crime in this country, and I give the public the assurance that, under my Government's leadership, that will be sustained in the years to come.

University Hospital Wishaw (Neonatal Intensive Care)

2. Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab): Having your baby in neonatal intensive care is a terrifying experience for any parent. Families whose babies are being cared for by doctors and nurses at the Wishaw neonatal unit know that their child is being treated close to home in one of the best neonatal departments in the country. That unit treats many of the sickest babies every year, and it has allowed new parents in Lanarkshire to stay close to their families and support networks during some of the most difficult and emotional times of their lives. The Wishaw neonatal unit has won awards for the standard of care that it delivers, and even people in this chamber have relied on it in their time of need, so why does the Scottish National Party want to downgrade that life-saving unit?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The recommendations that the Government has considered in relation to the neonatal unit at Wishaw general hospital are the product of advice from an expert group that included the medical director of NHS Forth Valley; the Scottish neonatal nurses group; Bliss, which is the United Kingdom's leading charity for babies who are born premature or sick; and the Scottish Perinatal Network.

The expert group recommended that we take forward a model that was tested at a number of different sites around the country—Queen Elizabeth university hospital, Crosshouse hospital, Edinburgh royal infirmary and Victoria hospital. The group proposed that units should be located at the Royal hospital for children in Glasgow, Aberdeen maternity hospital and Edinburgh royal infirmary's Simpson centre for reproductive health.

Those recommendations were made for babies who have the most serious and complex conditions or are at the extremes of prematurity, so they need the most specialist level of care to have the best chance of survival. The Government received that professional clinical advice from experts, and I think that the Government is correct to follow it. The vast majority of babies will still be cared for in their local neonatal unit, and those units, including the one in Wishaw, will continue to deliver a range of care, including some intensive care.

Anas Sarwar: My understanding is that the experts actually suggested a range of options and that the Government is choosing an option at the lower level of that range rather than other options. The reality is that downgrading the Wishaw neonatal unit will force families to travel on long journeys for care.

We can take the example of Tammy Johnstone. Her son, Kai, was so sick when he was born that she was not allowed to touch him for 72 hours. She gave birth to him locally in Wishaw. However, under the SNP's plans, she would have been forced to travel, perhaps to Aberdeen or even further afield. She told me:

"Kai was so ill that he was four weeks old before I was allowed to pick him up—how would he have been put in an ambulance anywhere, let alone to Aberdeen? Doing things like that can cause everlasting damage."

The SNP's plans to downgrade the Wishaw neonatal unit are opposed by clinicians, experts and parents such as Tammy. Why does John Swinney think that he is right and that experts, clinicians, nurses and parents are wrong?

The First Minister: I take issue with two points in the description that Mr Sarwar has put to the Parliament today. The first is the suggestion that this is somehow my personal, individual view. The Government has sought expert clinical opinion. This has not been conjured up by the Government, having considered the issue on its own behalf. We have sought expert clinical opinion, and I have put on the record where it has come from. On other occasions, members of the Parliament take the Government to task for not following expert opinion, but, in this case, Mr Sarwar wants me to ignore expert clinical opinion, which has led us to the conclusions that we have arrived at.

My second point is about the future of the Wishaw unit. The unit at Wishaw will continue, but it will be recommended that the very small number of babies who need expert specialist care to maximise their chances of survival should be treated in a different way. That is the expert advice that the Government has received.

Anas Sarwar: John Swinney is choosing to listen to certain experts and to ignore other experts in the process. He is choosing to hide behind experts when it comes to the Government's decision. The reality is that the award-winning Wishaw unit is giving life-saving care. The expertise exists there, but it would not exist if the unit was downgraded.

The SNP's failure to support neonatal services and other services in the national health service has a human cost. I will give the First Minister another case—that of Amanda Todd, a mum who faced the prospect of travelling from Scotland to

Dublin to give birth. Why? It was because the SNP has already overseen a shortage of beds here. Amanda found out that there would be space in Scotland for her and her baby only the day before her operation; she had been told to plan to go to Dublin. Amanda told me:

"It seems that the SNP Government cares more about saving money than saving babies' lives."

Amanda's story is just one example of how the SNP has broken our NHS. Just this week, we learned that waiting lists for child and adolescent mental health services are growing, that Scotland's NHS faces a cancer specialist crisis and that more Scots than ever before are being forced to go private. Is it not the case that the NHS is simply not safe in John Swinney's hands?

The First Minister: The first thing that I want to say is that there is nothing in the proposal about Wishaw general hospital that is about saving money. It is about maximising the chances of saving babies' lives. That is what the proposal, which was informed by expert opinion, is about.

On the question of cancer care that Mr Sarwar raised, I indicate to him that, in relation to the 31-day standard, the performance at the most recent stage of reporting was that 94.7 per cent of patients were treated within 31 days of a decision to treat. The median wait for treatment was just four days—at least half of those patients are being given treatment within four days of being referred in relation to the 31-day standard.

I appreciate that there are pressures on cancer services and wider healthcare services across the country. That is why the Government has introduced measures that are strengthening the NHS. For example, we committed to providing an additional 64,000 appointments and procedures by March of this year. However, we did not deliver 64,000; we delivered 105,500. The Scottish Government is putting in investment to strengthen delivery so that we reduce waiting times and improve access to the NHS, and that will dominate the Government's approach to the NHS in the period to come.

Sewage

3. Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): There are sanitary towels and wet wipes on the beach at North Berwick. There is raw sewage in Gala. There is a beach covered in thick brown discharge in Dumfries and Galloway. The River Almond is making swimmers sick. Paddle boarders get covered in sewage in the River Tay.

Today, on world environment day, the Scottish Liberal Democrats are publishing new research showing thousands of complaints from members of the public about sewage—sewage that is

“absolutely honking” in Dingwall. Songs were written about Scotland being the

“land of the shining river”.

Does the First Minister mind that his Government’s own water company is dumping so much sewage into it?

The First Minister (John Swinney): On the question of water quality, I note that 87 per cent of Scotland’s entire water environment is assessed by the Scottish Environment Protection Agency as having a high or good classification, an increase from 82 per cent in 2014. Obviously, I want to ensure that we have the highest-quality natural environment, and that we have water systems that are of the highest quality, too, and those figures indicate that the Government is making progress on the steps that we are taking to ensure that that is the case.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: The complacency in the First Minister’s answer suggests that he is content with the situation as it is. The European Court of Justice has ruled that sewage dumping should happen only in exceptional circumstances, but it is happening all the time and almost everywhere, even on dry days. Last year, Scottish Water dumped sewage at least 24,500 times, but the lack of monitoring means that we know about only a fraction of what is really going on.

The Scottish Liberal Democrats are calling for a new act of Parliament—a clean water act—to tackle the issue, because, under the Scottish National Party, communities are just expected to put up with it. Last week, Thames Water got fined £100 million for sewage dumping, but there are never any consequences here in Scotland. Is that because the First Minister knows that it is his Government that is at fault for this absolutely honking problem?

The First Minister: What is absolutely honking is Mr Cole-Hamilton’s attempt to conflate the situation in Scotland—and the operation of one of the strongest assets in our country in our publicly owned water network—with that of Thames Water. The privatisation of water in England has been an unmitigated disaster for the people of England and Wales, and I thank our predecessors for not taking such a foolish decision in the first place.

We operate in a situation that is not perfect, but in which we have a high level of performance in relation to the quality of our natural environment. I do not think that it is a good advert for Mr Cole-Hamilton to undermine the strength of the natural environment of Scotland when we are spending £500 million on improving water quality in Scotland, and then to compare Scotland’s water—an asset to our country—to the folly that is privatisation in England and Wales.

Film and Television Production

4. Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): To ask the First Minister how the Scottish Government is supporting film and TV production in Edinburgh and throughout Scotland. (S6F-04160)

The First Minister (John Swinney): We are committed to seizing the significant opportunities to grow our screen sector and have increased the budget for Screen Scotland, our dedicated public agency for screen, by £2 million in the current financial year to £11.25 million. That will allow Screen Scotland to continue to nurture locally originated content, develop skills and training opportunities and education for the next generation, and increase inward investment. An ever-increasing number of productions are choosing Scotland, such as the latest Netflix drama “Dept Q”, which was supported by Screen Scotland and filmed on set and in studios in Edinburgh.

Ben Macpherson: As the First Minister has said, several successful and notable productions have been filmed in Scotland in recent years, and they have made a positive creative and economic impact.

As has been mentioned, Netflix’s new, gripping, fictitious drama “Dept Q” was released globally last week. Much of it was filmed at FirstStage Studios in Leith, in my constituency, in other locations around Edinburgh and elsewhere in our picturesque nation. “Dept Q” is currently one of the most viewed series on Netflix; at the moment, it is ranked number 1 in the United Kingdom. It promotes our country in various ways—even the Parliament gets a mention—and many of the very talented cast and crew are Scots. The producers, Left Bank Pictures, have stated that they had a great experience filming in Scotland, which is really uplifting.

How can we build on our recent success, continue to grow our screen industry and work together across the public sector to make Scotland an even better and more attractive place for more filming commissions, including from the BBC and Channel 4?

The First Minister: Mr Macpherson gives a strong account of the situation in his constituency. I welcome the investments that have been made in relation to “Dept Q”—it has been a tremendous success and will be a great advert and showcase for our country.

The Government will support the screen sector as strongly as we can. As I indicated in my earlier answer, we have increased the budget for Screen Scotland, and in its strategy, which was published last year, it outlined an ambitious plan to grow the sector further and to combine international

investment with increased support for emerging Scottish producers and local creative originations. The development is very welcome, and I am delighted that Mr Macpherson has highlighted the significance of the opportunity for Scotland.

Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con): ScotRail is owned by the Scottish Government, yet it has chosen to use an artificial intelligence voice instead of employing a Scottish voice actor. Is that how the Scottish Government supports actors—

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): I am sorry, Dr Gulhane, but I called for supplementaries to question 4 in particular.

Sandesh Gulhane: That was one.

The Presiding Officer: Oh, pardon me—you came round to the subject of actors. I just picked up on your last comment. [*Laughter.*] Do continue—my apologies.

Sandesh Gulhane: That was my question, Presiding Officer. Is this how the Scottish Government supports actors?

The First Minister: ScotRail has taken forward a development, which I understand has caused some controversy, and I am sure that ScotRail is engaging constructively with all concerned. Sometimes, these things need careful handling, and I am sure that ScotRail will do exactly that.

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport has just told me that they are fixing it—so they will be fixing it.

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): It is great to hear about new film production in Scotland, but we also need to see those films in Scotland. Therefore, I want to inform the First Minister that, after support, the Filmhouse is going to open at the end of this month, but it needs a tiny amount of capital to ensure that it will be accessible and able to use all the best formats for showing films. Will the First Minister commit to considering the tiny amount of capital funding that the Filmhouse needs to get over the line and get that accessibility?

The First Minister: Given that the proposition was put to me in such a constructive fashion, I will heartily agree to do that. If Sarah Boyack would like to furnish me with the detail—which I am sure that Mr Robertson will be close to—I will have a close look at it.

The Filmhouse is a magnificent asset in the city of Edinburgh. I remember the rite of passage that I went through in my youth in being able to see films at the Filmhouse, so I am very supportive of it. We will see what the Government can do to help.

Child Sexual Abuse Investigations

5. Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):

To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government's response is to reports that Police Scotland's national child abuse investigation unit now carries out 700 child sexual abuse investigations a year, representing an increase of 30 per cent since 2015. (S6F-04155)

The First Minister (John Swinney): Child sexual abuse and exploitation are abhorrent crimes that have a devastating impact on victims and their families. My heart goes out to any child who has experienced abuse.

Any reported rise in abuse of that nature is, of course, deeply concerning. I recognise the vital work of Police Scotland's national child abuse investigation unit in identifying and safeguarding children and stopping perpetrators and bringing them to justice. The Scottish Government is working with Police Scotland and other partners to support robust collective action, and I encourage anyone with a concern about a child to contact Police Scotland.

Roz McCall: Presiding Officer,

"People based in Scotland are offending against Scottish children. It's a lot closer to home these days. It's on our doorstep. We are actioning between 15 and 20 search warrants on a weekly basis across Scotland. Let's be perfectly blunt about it—the demand is through the roof."

Those are not my words, but the words of a Police Scotland detective chief inspector.

Our children are in more danger now than they were in previous decades, thanks to the progress of technology, and paedophiles can now make direct contact with children within 30 seconds—that is a truly terrifying statistic. To say that it is down to online platforms to control the issue is naive in the extreme.

Since 2015, police numbers have gone down by 750. My question is simply this: how can Police Scotland keep our children safe when it has fewer officers and crime is increasing?

The First Minister: I will make a number of points to Roz McCall. First, the fact that Police Scotland's national child abuse investigation unit is carrying out many more investigations illustrates that police resources are being deployed appropriately to tackle issues of serious crime in our society. That is my first point of reassurance.

My second is that the work that is undertaken in relation to, for example, prosecutions is formidably effective. The conviction rate for individuals who were prosecuted for child abuse in 2022-23 was 89 per cent, so the evidence that is gathered by the police and the Crown is strong enough to obtain that level of convictions. That level of

convictions has been sustained, despite the fact that there has been a growth in cases.

The third point that I would make to Roz McCall is that a lot of work is undertaken in Scotland to support international activity to tackle child sexual abuse. The Atlanta declaration, which brings together the world's leading child protection experts to tackle such abuse, has its roots in Scotland, and it is part of the work that we are taking forward to lead the international effort in that respect.

My final point is that Roz McCall said that it was naive to expect online platforms to tackle the issue, but I do not think that that is naive—I think that online platforms have an absolute obligation to tackle the issue. They are currently getting away scot free, and we are engaging with the United Kingdom Government to do as much as we can to ensure that online platforms live up to their responsibilities.

Ferry Services (Scotland to France)

6. Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): To ask the First Minister what action the Scottish Government is taking to secure a direct ferry route between Scotland and France. (S6F-04145)

The First Minister (John Swinney): The Scottish Government remains wholly convinced that Scotland's future would be best served by being a member of the European Union and we are determined to support the transport connections that will enable that to be possible. Improving our transport and trade links to the European mainland is even more important given the challenges that we face at this time.

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport met Mr Ruskell on Tuesday evening to discuss the issue and I know that she is happy to continue communicating regularly with potential operators and with Scotland's main ports so that Scottish exporters and passengers can have more direct routes to and from Europe.

Mark Ruskell: I welcome that engagement with the cabinet secretary earlier this week. It is absolutely clear that a direct ferry service between Rosyth and Dunkirk would be a great win for the economy and the environment as well as being wonderful news for all of us who cherish connections with the rest of Europe.

I understand that the ferry operator DFDS wants to move forward and to begin sailings next spring, Forth Ports in Rosyth wants progress, the port of Dunkirk has bought into the idea and the Westminster Government is also supportive. The only thing that is getting in the way, First Minister, is Brexit bureaucracy regarding the location of a border control post. Time is ticking away because

a resolution must be found by the end of June in order to secure the service. First Minister, are you able to take the lead in convening stakeholders to resolve the remaining issues and get that over the line?

The Presiding Officer: I remind members always to speak through the chair.

The First Minister: I welcome the assessment given by Mr Ruskell. I know that the Cabinet Secretary for Transport is very much engaged on the question and is familiar with the border control issue that is causing some difficulty. She has discussed the issue with Mr Ruskell and with Annabelle Ewing, who has also been pursuing the issue. We have had good and constructive discussions with DFDS, Forth Ports and various other interested parties.

I am very happy to be involved, but I am super-confident that the Cabinet Secretary for Transport will be able to do all that I could possibly contribute. I am sure that she will let me know if she needs any support. I assure Mr Ruskell that the Government would welcome the ferry route and that we will do everything that we can to remove any obstacles that are in the way.

The Presiding Officer: We move on to constituency and general supplementary questions. Concise questions and responses will enable more members to be involved.

Immigration (Workers' Skills)

Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): The chief executive of Scottish Engineering has warned that Labour's immigration proposals risk undermining the recruitment of vital workers, saying:

"Immigration is a vital source of skills and experience that cannot be replaced overnight."

My concern is not only for Scotland but for my constituency, including Grangemouth, where science, technology, engineering and mathematics skills must be part and parcel of any future economic recovery. Will the Scottish National Party Government continue to make the case for a separate immigration system for Scotland, not only because it is the right thing but because it is an economic imperative?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The Government will do that. I am not sure whether I have shared this detail with Parliament, although I think that I may have done. In the aftermath of the publication by the United Kingdom Government of its green paper on immigration, I convened a meeting of stakeholders across the education, health, social care, food and drink, hospitality, construction and engineering sectors. The view that was expressed to me from around that table

was that the proposals from the UK Government were directly damaging to the prospects of the Scottish economy, given the challenges that we face in boosting our working-age population, which is boosted by migration.

We are working with stakeholders. I also raised the issue with the Prime Minister when we met a week past Friday and indicated that we need a different and distinctive approach to migration in Scotland. This Government will pursue that, doing so in consultation and dialogue with stakeholders, one of which is Scottish Engineering. I welcome the contribution from that organisation, which Michelle Thomson has placed on the record.

Largs (Care Home Impact)

Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): I spoke today to the Largs Medical Group, which is the only general practitioner practice serving the people of Largs. Staff raised their concerns about plans for a new 80-bed care home that would focus mainly on patients with dementia. The GP practice is worried that it will bear the brunt of the additional pressure created by such a facility. Is the First Minister aware of those plans and does he agree that there is a risk of an impact on local residents, who are already worried about the difficulty of getting GP appointments?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I am not familiar with the case that Pam Gosal puts to me, although I understand that Mr Gibson, who is the local member, has met the Largs Medical Group to discuss the issue.

This is a local matter and a variety of discussions will have to be undertaken with the local authority and the health board. Those issues will be considered at a local level, but it is important that we have a network of social care and residential care facilities around the country that meets the needs of the population. That must be a fundamental hallmark of our society. Of course, one of the challenges that we face in social care and residential care is finding enough care workers, which is not helped by the UK Government's approach to immigration.

Ferry Services (Barra)

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): This week, I attended a meeting with constituents from Barra, CalMac Ferries and Caledonian Maritime Assets Ltd. It became clear during the meeting that it has long been recognised that Barra's ferry, the MV Isle of Lewis, will be retired next year. Despite that, however, a practical alternative ferry has not been planned for the route. CMAL suggested a ferry with a lot less capacity, citing the population size of the isle of Barra, apparently ignorant of the fact that the islanders cannot get bookings on their existing

ferry due to lack of capacity. Barra is the southern gateway to the Western Isles.

The fact that decisions are made on assumptions held by distant bureaucrats rather than the available data indicates why our ferry provision is in such a mess. Will the First Minister intervene personally to ensure that, when the MV Isle of Lewis is retired, the people of Barra have a ferry that meets their needs?

The Presiding Officer: Let us keep our questions and responses concise.

The First Minister (John Swinney): As Rhoda Grant probably knows, I am very familiar with issues in relation to the ferry fleet. CalMac has to make a variety of operational judgments. One of the obligations of the contract that has been put in place is that such judgments must be undertaken in dialogue with the ferry users committee and individual island communities, which I know is something that the Cabinet Secretary for Transport insists on at all times.

As Rhoda Grant will know, more capacity will come into the fleet shortly, and those operational issues will be considered. I hear her point in relation to the MV Isle of Lewis and I will ask for a briefing on the current situation to make sure that the needs of the community in Barra are properly taken into account.

Child Poverty

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): New analysis from Loughborough University has highlighted a strong correlation between Westminster's cruel two-child cap and child poverty. It also found that SNP policies such as the Scottish child payment have contributed to overall lower levels of poverty across Scotland compared with the rest of the United Kingdom. Will the First Minister advise what assessment the Scottish Government has made of that report? Can he say more about what action the Scottish Government is taking to eradicate child poverty in Scotland despite the barriers that Westminster puts in the way?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The report highlights the difference in the approaches that are taken in Scottish Government policies and United Kingdom Government policies, which has resulted in a situation where child poverty rates are lower in Scotland than in the rest of the UK. There are interesting and powerful observations in the report.

The Scottish Government is taking forward work to remove the two-child limit, which is a step that should have been taken by the Labour Government. People in Scotland can be assured that the Scottish Government is getting on with doing what a Labour Government is not doing

properly for Scotland, and that we will be lifting children out of poverty as a consequence.

Marine Environment and Fisheries

Maurice Golden (North East Scotland) (Con): In light of the recent “Ocean Witness” report from Open Seas, how can the Scottish Government accelerate the delivery of the required management measures in order to protect the marine environment and safeguard sustainable fisheries for the future?

The First Minister (John Swinney): There is an interplay of different factors that have to be considered in relation to fisheries management and the sustainability of our oceans. The Government’s policy framework aims to do that and to reconcile some of those tensions and challenges. We will take that forward through engagement with different communities and stakeholders and by ensuring that we fulfil our statutory obligations.

Scottish Water (Pay Negotiations)

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

Scottish Water workers are on strike this week. On Tuesday night, Scottish Water’s chief executive turned up at pay talks with the trade unions for less than two minutes. If Scottish Water’s chief executive officer can scoop up almost half a million pounds a year, why can he not lead pay negotiations? So, will the First Minister instruct his acting cabinet secretary and direct the bosses of Scottish Water—whose inflation-busting salaries, bonuses, pensions and benefits he, as a minister, for more than a decade, personally supported and signed off—to do the job that they are lavishly rewarded for, enter meaningful negotiations this afternoon, make an acceptable offer and get this industrial dispute resolved once and for all?

The First Minister (John Swinney): Yesterday, I received a letter from the general secretary of the Scottish Trades Union Congress on some of those questions about the Scottish Water pay talks. Last night, I asked for an update from the chief executive of Scottish Water on the approach that has been taken to the negotiations. I received that update just before 8 o’clock this morning, and I have considered it. In that note from the chief executive of Scottish Water, he indicates to me that he attended the talks to demonstrate leadership support for the engagement but—*[Interruption.]* I ask Mr Leonard to allow me to finish my sentence. The chief executive said that he did not participate in the negotiations because he wanted to leave them to the established

negotiating machinery, involving the trade unions and the leadership of Scottish Water.

That is the account that has been given to me. Talks start at 1 o’clock this afternoon, and Mr Leonard will not be surprised to hear what the Government is doing: we are encouraging a resolution of those issues to ensure that the matters are resolved amicably.

Winter Fuel Payment

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): This week, Labour chancellor Rachel Reeves indicated that, although some more pensioners could receive winter fuel payments this winter as a result of the United Kingdom Government’s U-turn, not all will. Although Labour is determined to take away winter fuel payments from pensioners, can the First Minister provide an update on the Scottish National Party Government’s work to reinstate a universal winter fuel payment to all pensioners in Scotland?

The First Minister (John Swinney): That is another example of why people have been left dismayed by the actions of the incoming Labour Government. One of its first actions, after 14 miserable Conservative years, was to take away the universal winter fuel payments from pensioners. Frankly, for members of the public, it beggars belief that that was the priority of the Labour Government.

The Scottish Government is taking action and has made provision in the budget that means that every pensioner household in Scotland will receive a guaranteed minimum of £100 this winter. That will support 815,000 pensioner households and increase the total forecasted investment in our winter heating benefits to £138 million. Pensioners in Scotland can be assured that, when the Labour Government lets you down, the SNP will come to your rescue.

National Health Service Waiting Times (Gynaecology)

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): My constituent Sarah Beaton, from Elgin, asked me to share her experience of the health service in the hope that it improves things for others. Last June, Sarah was bleeding heavily during her period and went to see her general practitioner. Following multiple visits, she was recommended for a scan. There was a nine-month waiting list to get a scan. When she received the scan results, there were anomalies and she was suggested for referral to a gynaecologist. She was told that, on an NHS waiting list, she would have to wait another year and a half. Frightened, Sarah and her family felt that she could not wait that long and she went private, paying for it herself. That led to the discovery of cancerous lesions, which were

operated on last month, and Sarah is now recovering at home.

This morning, I received a response from the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care to a letter that I sent him about the case. What does the First Minister say to Sarah? What will be done to reduce NHS waiting times for gynaecology in Grampian, which are among the longest in the country?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I am sorry to hear of the experience of Mr Ross's constituent, and I wish Sarah Beaton well in her recovery. The circumstances that Mr Ross has set out are unacceptable. The health service should be able to address those issues faster, which is why the Government is concentrating on work to reduce long waits and investing to ensure that more procedures are undertaken.

In an answer to Anas Sarwar earlier, I cited that, during the early part of this year, we were able to exceed the targets that we expected to meet on early intervention through procedures. That underpins the approach that the Government is taking to address the situation. We have allocated more than £8.8 million to health boards to target long waits for gynaecology, in particular, to avoid the situation that Mr Ross recounted.

Energy Sector

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): A new report from Robert Gordon University has warned that 800 energy jobs a month could be lost unless urgent action is taken. That will be of significant concern to many of my constituents who are employed in the sector. Despite those dire warnings, the Labour United Kingdom Government seems determined to press ahead with its misguided energy policies. It is refusing to back vital initiatives such as the Acorn project and is sitting silent as workers lose their jobs.

Does the First Minister share my concern that Scotland's energy sector appears to be an afterthought for the UK Government? In the face of Westminster inaction, what steps is the Scottish National Party Government taking to deliver a just transition for my constituents in Aberdeen Donside?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The Government is taking a number of steps to ensure that we support a just transition to net zero in the Scottish economy. Part of that involves a focused approach to investment in renewables, which will have significant benefits to Jackie Dunbar's constituents.

What would also help us in our climate change journey, which is now absolutely critical and pressing, is support from the United Kingdom Government for the Acorn carbon capture and

storage project. It is critical that that agreement is given in the spending review next week. We have waited far too long for that. I was promised support for the project by the previous UK Conservative Government, but it failed to deliver. It is now incumbent on the UK Labour Government to take a step that will give us a strategic foundation to our approach to tackling climate change. That decision can be made next week by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, and I encourage the chancellor to take the decision to approve the Acorn project. We have waited far too long for that decision.

Decision Time

12:46

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is decision time. There are no questions to be put as a result of today's business.

There will be a short suspension to allow those leaving the chamber and public gallery to do so.

12:46

Meeting suspended.

12:49

On resuming—

Thomas Blake Glover

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-17428, in the name of Karen Adam, on Thomas Blake Glover—Fraserburgh's international legacy. The debate will be concluded without any question being put. Members who wish to participate should press their request-to-speak buttons.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament recognises what it sees as the extraordinary global contribution of Thomas Blake Glover, a pioneering Scottish merchant and industrialist, who was born on 6 June 1838 in Fraserburgh, at what is now known as Glover Garden on Commerce Street, and who was the son of the town's harbour master; acknowledges Thomas Blake Glover's key role in 19th century Japan, where he supported the Choshu Five, a group of young scholars whose work helped shape modern Japanese governance, industry and education, including the introduction of sign language; notes his pivotal contribution to the establishment of the Mitsubishi Corporation and his influence in the development of Japan's shipbuilding and industrial sectors; celebrates the enduring cultural and economic links between Scotland and Japan that it believes Thomas Blake Glover helped to foster, including the internationally renowned Glover Garden in Nagasaki; recognises the contemporary relevance of his legacy in Fraserburgh, where offshore wind turbines, visible from the coast and maintained at the harbour where Thomas Blake Glover's father served, include parts manufactured by Mitsubishi; acknowledges what it sees as this powerful link between Fraserburgh's maritime heritage and its current role in the global energy transition; welcomes the development of Fraserburgh's own Glover Garden as a symbol of education, pride and international friendship, and wishes every success to the organisers and attendees of the inaugural Thomas Blake Glover Festival, taking place on 8 June 2025, in the hope that it will become a lasting annual celebration of Fraserburgh's unique contribution to global history.

12:49

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): Tomorrow will mark the passage of exactly 187 years since a boy was born in a coastal town in the north-east of Scotland—Fraserburgh, which is fondly known as the Broch. On 6 June 1838, that boy, who was the son of the town's harbour master, was born on Commerce Street. His name was Thomas Blake Glover.

I doubt that anyone at that time could have imagined just how far that Fraserburgh boy would go—that, one day, he would be honoured by the Emperor of Japan, his work would transform entire industries and economies, and his legacy would still live on today, not just in history books but in the shared culture, education and innovation that continue to link Scotland and Japan.

I extend a warm welcome to the distinguished guests who join us in the gallery: the consul general of Japan and the cultural consul to the consulate-general of Japan in Edinburgh. It has been an honour to welcome our guests to the Parliament and to nurture the international friendships that mean so much to Scotland. Just last week, I had the pleasure of meeting the consul general at a meeting of the cross-party group on Japan, where I also met His Excellency the Japanese ambassador to the United Kingdom. It has been a week of making Scottish-Japanese connections.

The scale of Glover's global impact is truly extraordinary. He supported five young Japanese students to travel to Britain to study. Known as the Chōshū five, they went on to help to build modern Japan, and included one who became a Prime Minister who shaped the country's constitution, and others who made advancements in railway systems, modern engineering and infrastructure, and reform of currency and finance. One made his mark on the education system in several ways, including introducing education for deaf people.

That connection brings this story very close to home for me. As many members will know, my father is deaf, but they might not know that he is also a deaf historian. About this time last year, he introduced me to Dr Manako Yabe, a deaf Japanese academic and postdoctoral research associate at Heriot-Watt University, whose work focuses on deaf studies and communications technology. I am delighted to welcome Dr Yabe to the gallery today. My father and Dr Yabe had connected at a deaf history event in Edinburgh and began exploring historical links between Scotland and Japan. During those conversations they discovered that Thomas Blake Glover had supported the very group of scholars who helped to introduce deaf education in Japan.

Knowing the significance of Fraserburgh to me, my father invited me to meet him and Dr Yabe in the town, to visit the Glover garden on Commerce Street, which is the very site of Glover's birthplace. The garden has been lovingly created and is maintained by the owner, Michael Mennie, who warmly welcomed us. He also shared with us stories of his own visit to the Glover garden in Nagasaki, where Glover's former home is now preserved and visited by millions. In Japan, Glover is remembered, respected and celebrated.

After that visit, and our conversations with Michael, I thought, "Why not do something here, in Fraserburgh?" I began speaking to local community leaders and, before long, a festival committee was formed as a branch of the Rotary Club of Fraserburgh. The committee consists of passionate volunteers who have given their time, energy and hearts to creating something truly

special for the town that they love, and in an extraordinarily short space of time. Although she is far too modest to take credit herself, I want to recognise Councillor Ann Bell, who, as chair of the committee, has played a central role in co-ordinating the work of all who have been involved.

This Sunday, 8 June, we will come together for the inaugural Thomas Blake Glover festival. The festival is not just about looking back but about bringing people together to celebrate Fraserburgh's connections with the wider world and everything that we have to be proud of. There is so much talent and creativity in the town. The festival's afternoon programme will feature performances by incredible local talent.

Sunday will also be a day to celebrate our international friendships. We will be joined by several distinguished guests, including the consul general; the Mitsubishi Corporation's deputy chief regional officer for Europe, Middle East and Africa; Ronnie Watt OBE, who is a recipient of the order of the rising sun; and Lady Saltoun. I fear listing every person and group in case I inadvertently leave someone out, but I note that the full programme and list of distinguished guests will be available online for those who wish to follow the celebrations.

On the day, we will plant a cherry blossom tree in Glover's memory, right there on the site of his birth. It will be a living symbol of connection and growth, with roots in the Broch, just like Glover, but looking upwards to the rising sun, and blossoming each year on the lead-up to his birthday, so reminding us of our connections with Japan. That connection continues in ways that feel almost poetic. Anyone who stands at Fraserburgh harbour—where Glover's father once worked as harbour master—and looks out to sea will see wind turbines that form part of the Ocean Winds Moray east offshore wind project. Those turbines have links with Mitsubishi—the very company that Glover helped bring into being.

Fraserburgh is a town where people simply get on with it, and they work very hard. It is a place with global reach and a thriving fishing industry. The people there continually recognise and act on their potential. There are plans to expand the harbour, a master plan for future growth, and a strong and growing campaign to bring back rail to connect Fraserburgh to Aberdeen.

I believe that those are the kinds of forward-looking projects that would have resonated with Glover. He introduced Japan's first steam locomotive, he modernised shipbuilding and he supported education and reform. He was a connector of people and ideas and a true visionary. I believe that he would be proud of what is happening in Fraserburgh, not just because we are remembering him, but because we are

building something worthy of the legacy that he left behind. It is about making sure that a boy who was born on Commerce Street 187 years ago is not just remembered but celebrated, and that, through him, we remember what Fraserburgh has contributed to the world and what it can still contribute.

I thank everyone who has helped to make this happen, including the festival committee, the Rotary Club of Fraserburgh, Michael Mennie, Councillor Ann Bell, Dr Manako Yabe and, of course, my father, who introduced me to the legacy of Thomas Blake Glover—a wee boy from the Broch.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I, too, welcome the consul general.

We move to the open debate.

12:56

Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con): Konnichiwa. I thank Karen Adam for securing the time for today's members' business debate.

As we have heard, Thomas Glover was a truly remarkable man with roots that run deep in the north-east of Scotland. A strategist and an industrialist, he is lauded for his role, as we have heard, in establishing the Mitsubishi Corporation, a powerhouse of the Japanese industrial revolution.

Known as the Scottish samurai, Glover is venerated in Japan for his key contribution to industrialisation and modernisation, and that is why he was awarded the order of the rising sun, an extraordinary accolade for a man who hailed from the Broch.

As we have heard, Glover was born in Fraserburgh in 1838 on Commerce Street and educated in Aberdeen. Stonehaven, too, has a strong link to the man known as the Scottish samurai. In 2021, pupils from Mill O'Forest, Arduithie and Dunnottar primary schools worked with the Stonehaven sea cadets and the Stonehaven Horizon group to plant 120 cherry blossom trees in Mineralwell park. The garden was dedicated to the memory of Glover and is a living testament to his ingenuity and legacy.

As part of the Sakura cherry tree project, the garden has joined more than 1,000 parks, gardens and schools across the United Kingdom in marking 150 years of Japan-United Kingdom friendship and the continued co-operation between our two nations. The project was launched by the Japanese former Prime Minister, Shinzō Abe, and the UK Conservative former Prime Minister, Theresa May, in 2021.

There are always strong community champions behind such brilliant initiatives. Aberdeenshire

councillor, Wendy Agnew, working with local MP Andrew Bowie, spearheaded the project and helped to see it through over a four-year period. It has been enchanting residents and visitors ever since. Wendy thanks the consul general and the whole of Japan for what she said is a very generous gift to Stonehaven. On behalf of the community, she would like to invite the Japanese consul general to place a plaque in the garden when the blossoms are out in spring next year.

As we underline the importance of Thomas Blake Glover, we can also take the opportunity to think about many Scots who left Britain to start inspiring adventures on the other side of the world. The Davidson family from Aberlemno, near Brechin, moved to Wisconsin in the USA and, with Englishman Bill Harley, became the founders of the Harley-Davidson Motor Company. David Dunbar Buick, the Arbroath-born plumber, became an icon in the United States after founding the Buick Motor Company.

Along with Thomas Glover, those individuals were self-starters, adventurers and visionaries, and they are testament to the incredible spirit of the north-east. Arigato.

12:59

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): I congratulate my friend and colleague Karen Adam on securing today's members' business debate on Thomas Blake Glover.

There is a very long list of folk from Aberdeen—whether they were born there, grew up there or lived there later in life—who have helped to shape the world as we know it today. We have a history of innovation, world-leading engineering and global influence, but we are absolutely dreadful at telling folk about it. We seem to not want to talk up our history or the folk who made it happen. Thomas Blake Glover is probably the best example of that in Aberdeen. He is at least somewhat known and spoken about, although a great part of that is due to the work of the Mitsubishi Corporation and its kind donations that saw his parents' home in Bridge of Don, in my Aberdeen Donside constituency, turned into a museum.

We have a man who helped to shape Japan's history by playing a role in its civil war, helping to rebuild its navy, introducing rail travel there—maybe, one day, we might even reintroduce rail services to his native Broch, as Karen Adam said—and playing an important role in the foundations of the two internationally recognised brands of Mitsubishi and Kirin.

Thomas Blake Glover is a man whom we should be talking about. The extraordinary life that he lived lends itself to storytelling, but far too many

folk have not heard of him. I hope that today's debate will help more people to hear and learn about Thomas Blake Glover. If we can have success with him, we can maybe move on to some of our city's five Nobel prize winners, or the great minds that came through King's and Marischal colleges during the Scottish enlightenment.

However, let us start with Thomas Blake Glover. Karen Adam has already spoken about much of his life. It certainly was not boring or uncontroversial. He was an immigrant—well, an emigrant to us—he was an arms dealer; he was a criminal, due to the arms dealing, although he seems to have been forgiven as he sold only to the winning side and he commissioned warships for Japan in shipyards in Aberdeen; he ran a coal mine; he was a pioneer of public transport; he created jobs; and he owned a brewery. There is something there for everyone to have an opinion on.

It is certainly not a life that deserves to be forgotten, and it is disappointing that Glover house, his parents' former home that I mentioned, is now sitting empty. It was bought by Mitsubishi in 1996, restored to what it would have looked like in the 1850s, and was given to the Grampian Japan Trust to run as a museum. In 2006, it moved to being run by Aberdeen City Council, before eventually closing in 2012 due to low visitor numbers and rising costs. I remember being given a tour and hosting Japanese dignitaries there back in the day, when I had the privilege of being depute provost of Aberdeen.

Money has been spent maintaining and repairing the house since, but 13 years later, the council is still looking for a suitable purpose for the building, and its condition is slowly getting worse. It needs to be lived in to survive, as is the case for all buildings—they decay much more quickly when unused.

Whatever form it takes, whether it is a museum or something else, we must ensure that Glover has a lasting and fitting legacy in Aberdeen. As our city looks beyond oil and gas, he is probably an example for someone who could help to build new industries. Some of that might involve tourism—in which case, we must get better at telling and marketing his story—or it might be done through entrepreneurship, and it is his spirit that we will need to tap into. I have spoken about the past; now, the question is, what will the future be?

I thank Karen Adam again for giving me a chance to talk about Thomas Blake Glover today.

13:04

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): Like other members, I thank Karen Adam for securing this phenomenally important debate, on a day on which its importance to members here should not have been overshadowed by events elsewhere. I extend my welcome to the honourable guests who join us today.

I had a lovely speech prepared. I wanted to talk about the number of Scottish people—unfortunately, mainly men—who emigrated abroad and became recognised for the fortunes that they made or the developments that they were involved in. Jackie Dunbar's contribution allows me to mention James Paris Lee, of Lee-Enfield fame, the creator of the rifle, and the dubious, perhaps questionable actions of Charles Lockhart, who, of course, was one of the founders of Standard Oil. Jackie Dunbar phrased it so well when she said that we can all have an opinion on how those people operated.

However, I was much more taken by Karen Adam's opening statement because, on 6 June 1838—the day on which the subject of our debate was born—John Muir was six weeks old. Although he was no doubt crying, mewling and being a challenging child to his mum, he was another hero come into the world. We see many similarities in the two stories. They left Scotland as children and where they grew up shaped what they did in their future.

John Muir, of course, was born in Dunbar. As the third of eight children—not the most important in the household—he looked around at the East Lothian landscape, ran riot and escaped, and he fell in love with nature and with landscape. Then, for other reasons, he travelled abroad—in his case to America, where he grew up. Because of those memories, those childhood experiences and his love of nature, he became known as “John of the mountains” and the “father of the national parks”. He was the man who converted Presidents, getting them to look at nature in a different way. He was one of those men who was able to shape the future of another country because of his enthusiasm, his skill and his passion for telling stories in order to bring together something important.

John Muir's birthplace on Dunbar High Street is celebrated as a museum that is attended by schoolchildren from across East Lothian and further afield. It keeps that history alive and in place. As a result of John Muir, much money has come to the country from the US, and the museum is perhaps an example that can be followed elsewhere by local authorities, charities and supporters from outside the country to allow someone's story to live. Then, perhaps, in another place a pupil in primary 5 can wander into what

looks like an old-fashioned house, step outside and suddenly think, “Actually, no one can stop my future being what I want it to be, wherever it is and however it is made.”

Today’s debate about Thomas Blake Glover has allowed members across the chamber to look for their own heroes, and I hope that some can find heroines from their regions, too. It is perhaps always much more important for Scotland to look outwards than to look inwards. We celebrate our friends across the world who come here to find the history of people who are important in their own history. We meet them, we greet them and we celebrate that history. We use those experiences to teach our young people that there is genuinely nothing that they cannot achieve if they are born in Scotland and they look up.

13:08

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): I, too, congratulate Karen Adam on bringing the debate to Parliament.

Thomas Blake Glover is often hailed as the Scottish samurai. He was a remarkable figure who played an immense role in the modernisation of Japan during the 19th century. As Karen Adam has already pointed out, he was born in Fraserburgh. His family moved to Aberdeen in 1851, when his father became the chief coastguard in the area, and Thomas received part of his education at the Chanonry school in Old Aberdeen.

After leaving school, Glover embarked on a career with Jardine, Matheson & Co, which at that point was a major trading company, and his work took him to Shanghai in 1857. Two years later, he moved to Nagasaki in Japan, a nation that was in a period of isolation but which was about to experience some dramatic change. Initially, he was in Japan to work for Jardine, Matheson & Co, where he traded primarily in Japanese green tea, but his drive soon led him to found his own firm.

We have heard about some of Glover’s immense contributions from other speakers. In shipbuilding, he helped to establish in Nagasaki Japan’s first modern slip dock, a facility that was crucial for ship repairs. He later sold his share to the Japanese Government, which subsequently leased it to Mitsubishi, marking a foundational step for the corporation. He also helped to commission several warships for the Imperial Japanese Navy from shipyards in Aberdeen, including the Jho Sho Maru, which later became the Ryūjō Maru, which launched in 1869.

As Jackie Dunbar mentioned, Glover was involved in mining, opening a coal mine on Hashima Island and introducing modern mining techniques. He was responsible for introducing the

first steam locomotive, the Iron Duke, to Japan in 1865, which led to folks seeing the potential for railway transportation—Japan has truly grasped that with its railway network today. As has already been mentioned, he also established a brewery, the Kirin Brewery Company. I believe that this is an urban myth, but it has been said that the moustache on the creature on Kirin beer labels is a tribute to Glover’s prominent facial hair—I do not know whether that is true.

Glover made an immense contribution to Japan and its links with the north-east of Scotland, which led to much trade, including Aberdeen’s export of the world-renowned Crombie cloth. In my humble opinion, that trading network has to be celebrated.

We need to do more to celebrate Thomas Blake Glover. Like Jackie Dunbar, I hope that more can be done to renovate Glover house in Aberdeen to make it a place where folks from the north-east, Japan and elsewhere can visit and learn about the fabulous Thomas Blake Glover.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Douglas Lumsden as the final speaker in the open debate.

13:13

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): I congratulate Karen Adam on securing the motion for debate and thank her for educating us more about Thomas Blake Glover.

Today’s debate gives us an opportunity to celebrate someone from the north-east who is probably more famous outside the area than in it, as Jackie Dunbar noted. It also gives us an opportunity to celebrate Scotland’s strong links with Japan, which I witnessed at first hand when I was leader of Aberdeen City Council. Aberdeen signed a memorandum of understanding with Kobe in Japan in 2019, strengthening the links between the cities. Today, I am wearing my Kobe tartan tie, which is a gift that I received when a delegation visited Aberdeen to sign the agreement. It is not just tartan that we have in common; I also learned about our shared love of whisky.

When I was a councillor, I became aware of Thomas Blake Glover, his impact and the important role that he played in the industrialisation of Japan. I also learned that the council owned Glover house, which, as we have heard, was the Glover family’s home in Bridge of Don. I remember my conversations with Richard Sweetnam, a council officer who was sadly taken from us too young, about how big a deal Glover was and how, as a city, we should make more of a deal of him and celebrate him, which would be an opportunity for tourism. That view was shared by all parties in Aberdeen City Council. We did not often agree, but we did agree on Glover.

The then Lord Provost, Barney Crockett, was heavily involved with Mitsubishi to see whether we could take a partnership approach to utilising Glover house in Bridge of Don. I seem to remember that Martin Gilbert and Aberdeen Asset Management were also involved in that process.

Regrettably, in my time as a councillor, we could not come up with a sustainable plan on what to do with Glover house. We worked with the University of Aberdeen and Mitsubishi on a plan to use part of Glover house as a museum celebrating Glover, and part of it for Japanese students attending the University of Aberdeen to live in. However, that plan fell through when Covid struck, and I do not believe that any plan has come forward since then, which is a real shame.

I visited Glover house with a delegation from Kobe in 2019. It would be sad to see the house fall into further disrepair. It is part of the history of the north-east, and it should be protected. I hope that a sustainable future can be found for the house. My lasting memory of that visit was the friendliness of our Japanese guests. Their warmth and kindness, and their interest in Glover, will stay with me and made me determined to visit Japan in the near future. When I am there, I hope that I will visit the Thomas Blake Glover statue in Nagasaki to pay my respects to the man from the north-east who made such a huge impact in Japan.

I wish the organisers of the Thomas Blake Glover festival every success for the upcoming event.

13:16

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): I thank all members who have taken part in the debate and Karen Adam for lodging the motion. I also extend my welcome to our honourable visitors.

Scotland's relationship with Japan has endured for centuries and continues to grow from strength to strength. Indeed, I had the pleasure, when I was the cabinet secretary with responsibility for external affairs, of promoting Scotland's economy and other interests on three visits to Japan over the 11 years when I held that portfolio. Our relationship is marked by a deep mutual respect and admiration for one another's traditions and cultures, as well as an eagerness to promote further collaboration wherever possible. Last week, the First Minister hosted Japan's ambassador to the UK at Bute house to recognise the close relationship that Scotland and Japan share.

Our shared history is marked by numerous pioneers who continue to have a significant impact on our relations to this day. Thomas Blake Glover is rightly seen as someone who has great

significance in the development of modern Japan. His name is synonymous with the early links between Japan and Scotland. He played a pivotal role in the establishment of the Mitsubishi Corporation, helping to develop its shipbuilding operations. Mitsubishi has gone on to become one of Japan's largest trading companies, employing more than 60,000 people. His legacy lives on today in both nations. I congratulate Karen Adams's father for helping us to rediscover the deaf education connection between Scotland and Japan.

The Glover house and garden, which sits in Nagasaki, allows visitors to learn about Glover's life and influence on Japan, including the technologies that he helped to advance. Up to 2 million people visit it annually, which ensures that his history is not forgotten.

In 2015, I was lucky enough to see that marvellous garden on a trip to Japan, when I also visited the wider Nagasaki industrial area and Mitsubishi Shipbuilding Co, which is still there. I was given the honour of a tour of the Thomas Blake Glover house by trustees, and, interestingly, I saw some framed calligraphy on the wall. I asked for a translation. It said:

"The ocean is a field".

That obviously held meaning for Thomas Blake Glover in relation to trading and shipbuilding. There is an interesting connection with Fraserburgh, with its links to the ocean as a field being its fishing and the future opportunities with the sea.

During my visit, I presented Japanese stakeholders with 3D digital models of the Nagasaki industrial site, which was scanned as part of the Scottish Ten project, which is a joint collaboration between Historic Environment Scotland and the Glasgow School of Art. That scanned data helped to conserve a site that was of major significance to Thomas Blake Glover and other prominent Scots who were present in Japan in the 19th century, and it was influential in securing the site's United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization world heritage status.

As we have heard, we now have the Glover garden in Fraserburgh, which acts as a memorial to mark Thomas Blake Glover's birthplace and is a demonstration of the connection and friendship between Scotland and Japan. As part of the memorial, the inaugural Thomas Blake Glover festival will take place on 8 June, marking his contributions to both nations.

Thomas Glover's legacy transcends even his industrial ventures. A series of Japanese-Scotch whisky fusions have been created and named after him to honour his achievements—it is very

fitting to see him memorialised through Scotland's national drink. Thomas Blake Glover was a true pioneer, and it is only right that he is remembered in Scotland as he is in Japan.

Reflecting on the remarks of Jackie Dunbar and Douglas Lumsden, I think that there is an issue about what happens with the Glover house in Aberdeen. An idea was being explored—this was before Covid—to base Japanese students there. The Nippon Foundation is encouraging and supporting students to study in Scotland, so perhaps that is an avenue that can be explored.

I firmly believe that, as a friendly, open and outward-looking nation, Scotland should always encourage and explore connections with other nations, as Martin Whitfield pointed out in his thoughtful speech. Thomas Blake Glover's life and legacy is a prime example of the impact that Scottish individuals and businesses can have abroad, and the best tribute, as Karen Adam said, is using that legacy to build for the future. The Scottish Government's "Scottish Connections Framework", which was launched in 2023, sets out our ambitions to expand our relationships with and between Scotland's international communities. We are rightly proud of our long history of intellectual, cultural and economic exchange. Scotland's diaspora and our Scottish connections are an extension of Scotland itself.

The Scottish Government welcomes the development of the Glover garden in Fraserburgh, which is an initiative that honours someone who made a significant contribution to the development of Japan. It will serve as a reminder of the long-standing connection between Scotland and Japan and as a symbol of our lasting friendship. On behalf of the Scottish Government, I wish the organisers well in delivering the first Thomas Blake Glover festival, and I hope that the day is a great success. I thank the local constituency MSP, Karen Adam, for lodging her motion and for bringing this debate to our national Parliament.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate.

Meeting closed at 13:22.

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

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