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Thursday 19 June 2025

CONTENTS

	Col.
GENERAL QUESTION TIME	1
Great British Railways	1
Section 37 Applications (Engagement and Decision Making).....	2
Youth Violence.....	3
Scottish Fire and Rescue Service (Edinburgh)	5
Fife College (Funding)	6
A96 Corridor Review (Consultation).....	8
FIRST MINISTER'S QUESTION TIME	10
Schools (Disruptive Behaviour)	10
Alexander Dennis	13
Democracy Summit (Actions)	16
Acorn Project	18
Biodegradable Waste	19
Higher Education (Funding).....	20
Ardrossan Harbour	22
Migration to Universal Credit	23
Urgent Care Services (Skye).....	24
Professor Sir Geoff Palmer.....	25
Economic Growth Forecast	25
Train Cancellations	26
ACTION MESOTHELIOMA DAY 2025	28
<i>Motion debated—[Marie McNair].</i>	
Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP).....	28
Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP).....	31
Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con)	32
Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab)	33
Jackson Carlaw (Eastwood) (Con).....	35
Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab)	36
The Minister for Public Health and Women's Health (Jenni Minto)	38
SCOTTISH PARLIAMENTARY CORPORATE BODY QUESTION TIME	42
MSP Staff (Parental Leave).....	42
Parliament Facilities (Interim Policy)	44
PORTFOLIO QUESTION TIME	48
SOCIAL JUSTICE	48
Asylum Right to Work Pilot Proposal.....	48
Tenancies (Domestic Abuse)	49
Housing (Orkney Islands)	50
ILGA-Europe Rainbow Index.....	51
Tenants' Rights (Aberdeen).....	52
PUBLIC SERVICE REFORM STRATEGY	54
<i>Statement—[Ivan McKee].</i>	
The Minister for Public Finance (Ivan McKee)	54
NATIONAL ADVISORY COUNCIL ON WOMEN AND GIRLS EQUALITY RECOMMENDATIONS	69
<i>Motion moved—[Shirley—Anne Somerville].</i>	
<i>Amendment moved—[Tess White].</i>	
The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville)	69
Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con)	73
Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab)	76
Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green)	78
Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD)	80
Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)	82
Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con)	84
Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP).....	85
Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab)	87

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)	89
Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP).....	90
Maggie Chapman	92
Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab).....	94
Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con).....	96
The Minister for Equalities (Kaukab Stewart)	100
ALEXANDER DENNIS LTD	104
<i>Statement—[Kate Forbes].</i>	
The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Gaelic (Kate Forbes).....	104
BUSINESS MOTION	117
<i>Motion moved—[Jamie Hepburn]—and agreed to.</i>	
PARLIAMENTARY BUREAU MOTION	118
<i>Motion moved—[Jamie Hepburn].</i>	
DECISION TIME	119

Scottish Parliament

Thursday 19 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.

Great British Railways

1. John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind): To ask the Scottish Government what discussions it has had with the United Kingdom Government regarding the proposed establishment of Great British Railways and any potential implications for devolved responsibilities over rail services and infrastructure in Scotland. (S6O-04816)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): I, and the Government, are clear that full devolution of rail is in Scotland's best interests, not least to deliver the services that our communities and economy need and deserve. I am proud that ScotRail in public ownership has been a success and that ScotRail's train performance and passenger satisfaction are consistently higher than the Great Britain average.

I welcome the intent of the UK Government's rail reform bill—I have discussed it twice with the Secretary of State for Transport—and the commitment to protect current devolution of powers and learn from the example of Scotland's integrated approach to track and train. I want to continue to work constructively with the secretary of state to protect and enhance Scotland's interests, but I am concerned at the lack of clarity and detail in the proposals to date.

John Mason: I thank the cabinet secretary for that reply, but her final point about the lack of clarity concerns me, too, given that the idea has been around for a long time. Can she assure us that the Scottish Government will resist any attempts to take decisions on, for example, ticket prices or rail investment back to London?

Fiona Hyslop: I have repeatedly sought assurance from the Secretary of State for Transport that any decisions made by the UK Government will not dilute Scottish ministers' existing powers. Scottish ministers will do all within our power to protect the interests of Scottish railways in order to allow us to continue to build on the success of bringing ScotRail and Caledonian Sleeper into public ownership for the benefit of the people of Scotland. However, unless and until we

see text in the bill that secures accountability for integrated rail services to this Parliament and this Government, that risk still exists.

Section 37 Applications (Engagement and Decision Making)

2. Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what new measures it has introduced in relation to supporting improved community engagement and respecting local democratic decision making, when section 37 applications for energy infrastructure are considered. (S6O-04817)

The Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Energy (Gillian Martin): On 7 May, the Scottish Government published new guidance on how to deliver consistent and meaningful pre-application consultation for transmission projects requiring an environmental impact assessment. That guidance creates more transparency around the process, ensuring that communities understand when and how they can best input at the various stages of development.

The Scottish Government has also been working with the United Kingdom Government on its Planning and Infrastructure Bill, which includes provisions to make pre-application consultation statutory for the first time. That will guarantee communities the opportunity to have their say earlier in the process.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: Last week, the energy consents unit approved the Skye reinforcement project, overruling the decision of Highland Council and proving without doubt that it is not elected local representatives but unelected officials in Edinburgh who have the final say in large energy infrastructure projects.

Last Saturday, community councillors from across the Highlands met in Beaulay for a convention chaired by local councillor Helen Crawford. In their agreed unified statement, they confirmed their opposition to what they rightly called the "unjust and unnecessary industrialisation" of the Highlands. They declared that community consultation was "inadequate", that local democracy was "being overridden" and that local decisions were being

"disregarded by the Scottish Government."

What is the cabinet secretary's response to that unified statement? With further meetings planned, will she agree to meet convention members and elected local officials to hear at first hand from the people who are impacted by the intrusive energy infrastructure that her Government is forcing on their communities?

Gillian Martin: The previous Conservative UK Government showed no interest in making either

community engagement or community benefits associated with developments or transmission mandatory, despite the Scottish Government asking for that to be addressed urgently. The legislation and regulations that we must, in law, abide by in Scotland when considering applications are set by the UK Government. The Scottish Conservatives know that, but they are determined to create a narrative that says that everything surrounding the issue is in the hands of the Scottish Government.

I say to Mr Halcro Johnston that I wish that we had every lever available at our disposal with regard to these matters. In an independent Scotland, we would change the regulations to ensure strict—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear the cabinet secretary.

Gillian Martin: In an independent Scotland, we would change the regulations to ensure strict community engagement conditions.

Youth Violence

3. Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP):

To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on its work to tackle and prevent youth violence, including any outcomes from the summit held on 12 June. (S6O-04818)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs (Angela Constance): Informed by the meeting held on 12 June and by what we already know is working, we are considering what more we can do to strengthen support for young people and communities. We have also announced an additional £6 million for the next phase of the cashback for communities programme, providing a total of up to £26 million over the next three years to support safe spaces, trusted adults and a range of positive diversionary and support activities for young people. Separately, we will publish a progress report on the implementation of the violence prevention framework for Scotland later this year, which will highlight action that we have taken with our partners over 2024-25.

Collette Stevenson: I thank the cabinet secretary for that information. She will appreciate my constituency interest in the summit, given recent events that have affected East Kilbride. Much progress has been made in tackling crime in Scotland under this Government, but the behaviour of a small minority of young people seems to be changing for the worse, with constituents telling me about signs of worrying behaviour being overlooked.

Will the cabinet secretary set out how the Scottish Government is working with partners to ensure that the education system, police, social work, youth workers and other relevant

stakeholders can link up to get in early and prevent any signs of violent or antisocial behaviour from escalating? Could she also say what action is being taken to make young people safer, as well as the support that is available to parents and carers who are extremely worried?

Angela Constance: I, of course, appreciate Ms Stevenson's constituency interest in this matter, and my thoughts remain with the loved ones of Kayden Moy. His tragic death highlights the very real risks involved in violent behaviour and the need to prevent it from happening in the first place.

I reassure the member that partnership working is central to our response to children and young people. That has been the case since 2011, when we delivered the multi-agency whole-system response to preventing offending by children and young people, which brings together social work, police, health, education and other key partners.

Also, we have this week published new guidance for schools on the consequences of and risk assessments for violent, aggressive and dangerous behaviour. That guidance emphasises the need for early intervention and prevention and the importance of schools and families working together to promote positive relationships and behaviour.

Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con): This is the third summit on youth violence in two years. The first was to stop violence in our schools—that did not work. The second was to stop youth violence among young people—that did not work. Having attended the third summit, I do not have much confidence in a better outcome. Will the Government finally act and invest in youth services; increase stop and search powers to tackle youth knife crime, which is something that the Scottish Police Federation has asked for; drop the two-tier sentencing policies for under-25s; and make sure that actions have consequences?

Angela Constance: I was very pleased that Opposition spokespeople attended last week's youth summit. It is important that, as a Government, we openly engage with youth work leaders and hear directly from those who work on the front line in preventative work. It is also important that we do that on a cross-party basis and hear about the changing challenges facing our young people and how they are influencing some young people's behaviour.

I make no apologies for engaging with those on the front line, because it is important that we continue to listen to those on the front line who work with our young people to ensure that we implement what works. What I am not hearing from Ms Dowey—which is very unfortunate, bearing in mind that she kindly attended the

summit—are solutions; I hear only a harking back to the past. It is very clear that the evidence tells us that we have to work together. We must bear in mind that young people are the responsibility of us all, and we need to promote safe spaces, further develop the whole-family approach and utilise the peer mentor and role model interventions that we know work. Of course, police leaders have to respond where necessary, and they have the powers to do so.

Paul O’Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): I have, like other colleagues who have raised this issue, seen these kinds of incidents in my region. As the cabinet secretary knows, we had a recent incident of damage and vandalism at the united services club in Barrhead. The last social club in the town, it is run by older volunteers, and the incident was very distressing for them.

I heard what the minister said, but the Government has now had a number of summits. We need to know when the funding will come to support local authorities, community organisations and, crucially, the police in taking a focused and holistic view of the issue and to enable us to get the solutions that we need for communities.

Angela Constance: I very much appreciate Mr O’Kane raising his constituency concern directly in the chamber, but I point to the fact that we have invested in the cashback scheme, which is focused on diversionary activities, and in the violence prevention framework. We are also investing in our police force. I do not remember anybody in the chamber other than me arguing for an increase in funding for Police Scotland. Funding for policing in Scotland has increased by £90 million, and the budget, which not everybody in the chamber voted for, increased by £1 billion the resources going to local authorities the length and breadth of the country. I remain committed to working with colleagues on what works, based on the evidence, to prevent as well as to respond to youth violence.

The Presiding Officer: Concise questions and responses would be appreciated.

Scottish Fire and Rescue Service (Edinburgh)

4. Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on how it is assessing the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service’s capacity to provide emergency response cover and ensure community safety in Edinburgh, including in relation to meeting any needs resulting from population growth in the Lothians. (S6O-04819)

The Minister for Victims and Community Safety (Siobhian Brown): The capacity of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service to provide

emergency cover in any particular area is an operational matter for the service. Having said that, the emergencies that the service responds to have changed significantly over the years and it is right that it carefully considers how to adapt to the changing risks in order to remain effective and efficient, with firefighters being in the right place at the right time. The SFRS carries out detailed risk assessments based on a community risk index model that takes into account a wide variety of factors, including future population growth, industry and other hazards.

Ben Macpherson: As the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service considers all of that, the population in Edinburgh, and particularly in the north and east of Edinburgh, is clearly and obviously growing. Last year, when there was a fire at Breadalbane Street in my constituency, fire engines from Marionville fire station were some of the first on the scene, probably saving lives. A few weeks ago, when Cables Wynd house in my constituency unfortunately caught fire, fire engines from Marionville fire station were some of the first on the scene, again probably saving lives. Just last week, in a neighbouring constituency, Hawkhill court unfortunately caught fire, and in many people’s view, fire engines from Marionville fire station undoubtedly saved lives. Does all of that not make a compelling case that it is essential to keep a fire station at Marionville or nearby, despite the reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete issues that need to be dealt with?

Siobhian Brown: The Scottish Fire and Rescue Service is undertaking a strategic service review, and a full public consultation will be published next week. I urge anyone with any interest in it to please engage with that. I have been kept updated on the SFRS plans for the consultation and have received assurances that supporting evidence will be published alongside the consultation. I emphasise that it is about providing an optimal service to maintain community safety and inform final decisions. Robust evidence and data will need to be at the heart of decisions concerning any possible changes following the review. I reiterate to the member that I am always happy to meet him, and I will have a drop-in session next week if he would like to attend that.

Fife College (Funding)

5. Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of any impact of the recent changes to college funding arrangements on Fife College. (S6O-04820)

The Minister for Higher and Further Education; and Minister for Veterans (Graeme Dey): Colleges play an important role in our communities, which is why the budget for this year

sees a 2.1 per cent uplift to the college resource allocation. It is also a fact that the Scottish Funding Council has ensured that no college will have their teaching funding reduced for this financial year against the previous year. Fife College will receive a 1.26 per cent increase in teaching funding and a 4.9 per cent increase in capital maintenance funding in the final allocations. Of course, next year, the college will be moving into new facilities at the Dunfermline learning campus, which has been supported by tens of millions of pounds in Scottish Government investment. Operational decisions, including those on course provision and staffing are, of course, a matter for individual colleges.

Claire Baker: The minister is well aware that the 1.26 per cent increase in teaching funding is a real-terms cut that is below inflation and compares unfavourably with other colleges. Over the past decade, Fife College's core budget has been cut in real terms by almost 20 per cent. The college now faces defunding of £1.3 million in annual learning and teaching investment for the coming year. There is no question but that it is one of the losers in the funding changes, which will have consequences for staffing, academic provision and accessibility. Fife College principal, Jim Metcalfe, has said:

"The scale of the challenge now created by these changes is clearly precipitous."

Does the minister recognise that the decision risks creating for Fife College the situation that the changes seek to solve for other colleges, and that it places the college at risk?

Graeme Dey: The underlying assertion that other colleges are somehow being favoured over Fife College simply does not stand up to scrutiny given the brand-new £150 million Scottish Government-funded campus in Dunfermline that the college will take ownership of later this year.

If Claire Baker is arguing that the Scottish Funding Council should take financial resources away from other colleges to give to Fife College, perhaps she can provide a list of the institutions that she has in mind. I am sure that that would be of interest to some of her Labour colleagues who represent other parts of the country. If she is arguing that more money should be simply provided for the sector, I have to remind her that Labour made no such ask of the Government in the budget setting process. While Willie Rennie and the Lib Dems worked with the Scottish Government to secure an additional £3.5 million for colleges, Labour members sat on their hands. Therefore, they do not have a shred of credibility on the issue.

The Presiding Officer: I call Annabelle Ewing to ask the briefest of supplementaries.

Annabelle Ewing (Cowdenbeath) (SNP): The minister will be aware that I wrote to him on 11 June expressing my concerns about the implications of the new funding model for Fife College.

In an exchange with Alex Rowley on 8 May, the minister indicated that he was

"open to exploring whether we could add into the mix a further premium that recognises the delivery of courses that are linked to local and national economic need".—[*Official Report*, 8 May 2025; c 7.]

What is the status of that thinking?

Graeme Dey: I have not seen the letter that Annabelle Ewing has written to me, but she has raised it today.

Consideration of an additional premium sits within a wide-ranging and on-going piece of work to look at how we get colleges in their localities to better align their offerings with the needs of the local and national economy.

I will respond to Annabelle Ewing's letter in due course.

A96 Corridor Review (Consultation)

6. Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on when the consultation results of the A96 corridor review will be published. (S6O-04821)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): During the round-table meeting that I held in the Parliament on 4 February, which the member attended, I indicated that it was my intention to provide an update on the public's response to the consultation as soon as it was provided to me, once the responses had been collated and analysed and a report summarising the feedback had been produced. The 12-week consultation period ended on 21 February, with more than 1,400 responses received.

I thank the member for his question, which allows me to announce that I received the consultation report at the end of last week. I briefed Cabinet colleagues on its publication at the beginning of this week, and I can advise the Parliament that the consultation report will be published on Transport Scotland's website this afternoon. I will share the link to the report with all relevant north-east and Highland constituency and regional MSPs.

Liam Kerr: Almost 5,000 days, 16 transport ministers and 14 years since the Government promised to dual the A96 between Aberdeen and Inverness, we finally have a publication date for a consultation report. When the consultation results are released this afternoon, will that come with a

cast-iron commitment that the A96 will finally be dualled?

Fiona Hyslop: As I said, at the round-table meeting that I referred to, I indicated that it was my intention to ensure that the consultation report was published as soon as possible. That is what MSPs asked me to do.

In relation to our on-going commitment to dual the A96, any decision will have to be made in the context of available, planned budgets, the impact of this week's United Kingdom Government spending review and the Scottish Government's infrastructure investment plan refresh, which is anticipated later in the year. I did not want to delay the publication of the consultation report, given what MSPs asked me to do. I have done what I said that I would do in February.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes general question time; my apologies to the members we were unable to reach.

Before we move to First Minister's question time, I invite members to join me in welcoming to the gallery the Hon Raj Chouhan, speaker of the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia. *[Applause.]*

First Minister's Question Time

12:00

Schools (Disruptive Behaviour)

1. Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): Violent and disruptive behaviour in schools is getting worse. A small minority of pupils prevent the majority from learning in peace and in safety. Some teachers feel unsafe and many feel unsupported. The Scottish National Party's naive and weak approach fails absolutely everyone.

In response to that situation, the Scottish Government has just published new guidance on behaviour in schools. That document is exactly what we might expect from this ineffective Government: 49 pages of tedious, hand-wringing nonsense—it is complicated and confusing.

When John Swinney was education secretary, teachers said that he issued too much guidance, which made their jobs even harder, so why is he now repeating the same mistake?

The First Minister (John Swinney): It is always my priority to listen to the teaching profession. I did that throughout my time as education secretary. The guidance that Mr Findlay has cited is a consequence of the work that has been undertaken by ministers in consultation and dialogue with the teaching profession and other stakeholders in the world of education to make sure that that guidance is effective and necessary to support our education system.

The guidance is founded on an important point that Mr Findlay made in his question, which is that disruption and disruptive behaviour in schools are the product of a minority of pupils. The challenge, which the guidance is focused on, is to put in place the necessary steps and measures to ensure that any disruptive behaviour is addressed, so that the overwhelming majority of young people who behave perfectly well and engage well in their schools are able to prosper in their education.

Russell Findlay: If John Swinney really has listened to teachers, he seems to have gone on to completely ignore what they said.

What does the guidance say should happen if a pupil commits an act of violence? It tells teachers to give violent pupils a laminated paper with a set of bullet points that tell them to think about their behaviour. It also suggests that a way to tackle unsafe behaviour is to have a

“conversation to jointly problem solve with the child”.

It also says that disruptive pupils should be allowed to leave class two minutes early, which to

me sounds like a reward rather than a punishment.

The new guidance ends with 94 questions that teachers are supposed to ask themselves—94 questions; as if they have the time. So, on behalf of Scotland's teachers, I have just one question for John Swinney: is this for real?

The First Minister: I do not think for a moment that Mr Findlay's presentation of the guidance is in any way, shape or form representative of what is actually there. The guidance is trying to ensure that situations in which there is violence in our schools are addressed and that problems are de-escalated and resolved.

We have to ensure that every young person who engages with our education system is able to be well supported to fulfil their potential. For some young people that involves addressing disruptive behaviour, and that is precisely what the guidance assists the teaching profession to try to do, with the assistance of other resources that the Government has put in place in our schools to address the underlying causes of unacceptable behaviour by young people.

The guidance is designed to de-escalate situations in our schools to ensure that young people can participate in their education. If young people are unable to participate in their education, they are unlikely to go on to good outcomes in our society, which will mean that we will simply repeat the difficulties that we have seen for many years in relation to young people who do not go on to positive destinations. Of course, I note that, this week, we saw that another very high level of positive destinations has been achieved by young people in Scotland.

Russell Findlay: I am very confident of my interpretation of this document and I will let the teachers and pupils of Scotland decide what is in it.

My party has long argued that a stricter approach is necessary to restore discipline in schools. We believe in exclusions for violence because they protect staff and pupils and because they work. The new SNP guidance says that exclusions should be considered only "as a last resort" and that, when they are considered, teachers still need to follow the guidance that was introduced by none other than John Swinney in 2017. That guidance has a 66-item checklist for teachers to consider while they are going through an exclusion process.

Where does the SNP actually stand on this? Has it U-turned? Does it now support exclusions to tackle bad behaviour or does the SNP not know where it stands?

The First Minister: The guidance is crystal clear that exclusions are part of the approach that can be taken, but I am making it clear today that exclusions can have negative consequences for young people.

Russell Findlay says that exclusions work. However, if a young person is excluded from school, they are not in the safe environment of school and are therefore likely to be out on the streets and, potentially, able to become involved in some of the criminal activity that Mr Findlay has put to me—in the past fortnight at First Minister's question time—as being a risk to which young people are exposed. I simply point out to Parliament the inherent contradiction in what has been put to me. Two weeks ago, Mr Findlay said that we must make sure that young people are not exposed to criminal activity and, today, he is demanding that we exclude more young people from schools and put them at risk of being exposed to that criminal activity.

The most recent figure that I have available is for 2022-23, when 11,676 exclusions were recorded in Scottish education. I accept that that figure is lower than it was in 2018-19, but it is still a very high level of exclusion of young people from our schools. We have to consider the implications of not getting our approach to inclusion correct in our schools, because there can be long-term damage to young people and our society as a consequence.

Russell Findlay: That was absolutely desperate. As the First Minister knows fine well, there are different types of exclusion, rather than just putting children on to the streets, as he suggests. He virtually stopped exclusions, which is causing discipline to collapse. He turned teachers into social workers. He sent a dangerous message to disruptive pupils that they can get away with it. He fundamentally changed the classroom culture, and that is now harming children and their education.

People in the real world know how to sort out the problem. We need a tougher approach, not laminated cards and inclusive chats. If pupils are violent or serially disruptive, we should exclude them. Will John Swinney end the barrage of guidance and—please—empower teachers to take a stricter approach?

The First Minister: Mr Findlay has said something to Parliament that is palpably false.

Members: Oh!

The First Minister: I am going to explain it to Parliament. Mr Findlay said that I had stopped exclusions in Scottish education, but I have just told Parliament that there were 11,676 exclusions in 2022-23, so that statement from Mr Findlay is false. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Let us hear one another. [*Interruption.*]

The First Minister: Well, it is false. Let us just agree that it is false.

Members: Oh!

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear the First Minister.

The First Minister: Secondly, last week, after First Minister's question time, the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs and I convened a discussion at which Sharon Dowey, the Conservative spokesperson on justice issues, was present. Among the range of stakeholders in that discussion was a variety of people who are involved in violence reduction, such as Medics Against Violence and all those organisations that are doing really good work to avoid violence in our society and to de-escalate exactly the situations that I am talking about. In that conversation, not one of those people said to me that I should increase the level of exclusion from schools.

What we are getting from Russell Findlay today is a demonisation of young people and a failure to address the mechanisms and interventions that are required to solve a difficult issue in our society. It is simplistic nonsense and Parliament should ignore it.

Alexander Dennis

2. Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab): Last week, John Swinney claimed that he became aware of the issues that Alexander Dennis is facing a few weeks ago and that he was doing what he could to help the company, but that is not true. Almost a year ago, John Swinney received a letter, directly from the company, that set out how his decision to buy buses from China instead of Scotland was putting the company and jobs at risk. He did nothing for the skilled workforce.

Last week, as usual, John Swinney tried to find someone else to blame for his own failure by talking about United Kingdom procurement laws. Those laws did not stop the mayor of Greater Manchester, Andy Burnham, buying Scottish buses, but, somehow, they stop the Scottish National Party Government doing so. Since that warning almost a year ago, how many buses has the SNP Government ordered from Scottish companies?

The First Minister (John Swinney): Mr Sarwar is correct—I engaged with the company in August 2024, when I received correspondence from it, and I met it again in September. As a consequence of that interaction, we established work for Scottish Enterprise to do with the company to support it in securing its future. That work was taken forward as a consequence of that

dialogue. The company subsequently contacted us, in the past few weeks, in relation to its more immediate situation.

On bus orders, since 2020, Alexander Dennis has secured orders for more than 360 vehicles through Scottish Government funding programmes, and Manchester has ordered 160. I hope that the fact that 360 Alexander Dennis buses have been ordered through Scottish Government funding programmes and 160 have been ordered by Manchester indicates that the Scottish Government has been supporting Alexander Dennis.

Anas Sarwar: John Swinney did not answer the question. Since he received that letter almost a year ago, zero buses have been ordered from Alexander Dennis. He can try to waffle all he likes, but he cannot escape the fact that his Government has the powers and the resources to act but has failed to do so.

The Cabinet Office has clearly set out how the SNP Scottish Government could have helped to ensure that contracts go to Scottish manufacturers to support Scottish jobs. He could have applied social value criteria, which help domestic suppliers, or he could have considered a direct award. He did neither. Now that the UK Procurement Act 2023 is in place, the SNP Government can disregard bids from non-treaty suppliers, which include countries such as China. Did John Swinney not understand the law, or did he make the usual SNP attempt to pass the buck, find somebody else to blame and show no interest in actually doing his job?

The First Minister: If Mr Sarwar was to look carefully at what the company has said, he would see that it has expressed its appreciation of the engagement that it has had with the Scottish Government on all those questions. The company's workforce are the only people I am interested in here. The company has expressed its appreciation of the Scottish Government's sustained engagement in supporting its operations.

Since 2020, the Scottish Government has provided £58 million of funding for zero-emission buses through the Scottish ultra-low-emission bus scheme and the Scottish zero-emission bus challenge fund. That fundamentally holes Mr Sarwar's argument. Those funds have contributed to a situation in which, through its funding programmes, the Scottish Government has allocated 360 bus orders to Alexander Dennis—
[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear the First Minister.

The First Minister: We have done that as part of the process of supporting and assisting the

work that is undertaken at Alexander Dennis. *[Interruption.]*

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): They are built in China.

The Presiding Officer: Mr Bibby.

The First Minister: As I explained to the Parliament last week, the Scottish Government is engaged in a sustained dialogue with the company and various other interested parties to support Alexander Dennis. Those discussions are ongoing. We are talking to and engaging with the company regularly to find a way through the challenges and to encourage more orders to come to Alexander Dennis. That is at the heart of the approach that the Government is taking.

Anas Sarwar: The workforce does not need engagement from the Scottish Government; it needs contracts from the Scottish Government. Jobs come from contracts, and the reality is that zero buses have been commissioned since that letter was sent almost a year ago. The SNP needs to up its game rather than provide the usual waffle, because that just proves why Scots are sick of the SNP Government and its incompetence. After 18 years, it is out of ideas and out of time.

Last week, I told members that, a fortnight ago, an SNP MSP said that John Swinney had two weeks to come up with an idea to save his leadership. Let us look at what he has come up with. One in six Scots is on a national health service waiting list—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear Mr Sarwar.

Anas Sarwar: —and John Swinney's big plan is an app that was promised years ago and the merging of just two health quangos. Our schools are facing a behaviour crisis, and John Swinney's big idea is to laminate bullet points and put them on a wall. Scots are angry at the Government's failures and the SNP is back in crisis, and John Swinney's big plan is to say, "Quick! Press the big panic independence button to try to save my skin."

Is it not the case that we will only create jobs, save our NHS, improve our schools—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear Mr Sarwar.

Anas Sarwar: —and deliver for Scots if we get rid of this tired and incompetent SNP Government?

The First Minister: It is interesting that Mr Sarwar's interest in the workers of Alexander Dennis lasted for two questions, and then he got on to his usual posturing, with little substance, in the Parliament. That was the performance of a weak man in front of the Parliament today. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Thank you! Let us hear one another.

The First Minister: I will tell Mr Sarwar what I have been doing this week. I have been presiding over a Government that has put Scotland, for the 10th year in a row, at the top of the list for inward investment successes in the United Kingdom, after London and the south-east. We have been in that position for 10 years in a row under the SNP Government. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear one another.

The First Minister: We have seen a rise in the percentage of school leavers going on to positive destinations. This week, we confirmed that we will scrap the two-child benefit cap, ensuring that 20,000 children will be lifted out of poverty.

In the same week that we have committed to lifting the two-child cap, Anas Sarwar is toadying in behind the Labour leader in the United Kingdom to send 50,000 children into poverty through the welfare reform bill. Scotland can see that Anas Sarwar is linked to a UK Labour Government that will put more children into poverty, while my Government will lift children out of poverty. That is the Scottish Government delivering for our people.

Democracy Summit (Actions)

3. **Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green):** Nearly two months ago, the First Minister hosted a summit on opposing the far right and defending democracy. There was a clear message from many people in the room that Governments need to act to address people's concerns, to restore the public services that we all rely on, to give local communities more power, to tackle extreme wealth and to tax the big polluters that are profiteering from climate breakdown so that we can invest in our communities.

It was obvious that, without clear action, the summit would just be another talking shop, but I have seen no meaningful change since then. Since that meeting, what exactly has the Scottish Government done differently, in practical terms, to turn promises into action?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The Government has taken forward our agenda, which is about eradicating child poverty. I have just cited one example of our actions: taking measures to lift the two-child limit, which will lift children out of poverty. That is in stark contrast to the prevailing attitude of the United Kingdom Government.

We have been working with different groups to make a rational argument for an approach to immigration that will boost our working-age population, because we recognise that, unless we do that, we will suffer extreme economic harm and

have real difficulty in sustaining our public services.

We have taken the steps that were announced this morning on carbon budgets. We are following the Climate Change Committee's advice on the setting of budget limits and are deploying a programme that will tackle climate change.

Those are some of the measures that the Scottish Government is taking to address the substance of our agenda—I agree with Mr Harvie that there are real concerns about that—in order to ensure that we address the real concerns and priorities of people in Scotland and the threat to our democracy from the far right.

Patrick Harvie: It sounds as though the Government's agenda after the summit is exactly the same as it was before the summit. There is a real sense of drift from the First Minister. He came into the job saying that he wanted to build the best future for our country. Since then, he has watered down rent controls, stalled on plans to help people to stop using expensive fossil fuels, abandoned progress on human rights and equalities laws and ditched environmental actions such as the creation of a new national park. In addition, only today, he has rejected advice from his independent climate experts.

In place of the progressive green policies that the First Minister has walked away from, what is there? I genuinely struggle to think of a single signature policy that he has delivered in his year in the job that shows ambition and leadership. In the face of the threat from the far right, a steady-as-she-goes approach puts us on a course to disaster. Does the First Minister understand that people need to see real progress towards a fairer, greener Scotland and that failure to tackle inequality and injustice will benefit only the snake oil sellers on the far right?

The First Minister: To be blunt, I could not disagree more with Mr Harvie. I appreciate that this is his last First Minister's question time as co-convenor of the Green Party, so saying all that to me might have been his last hurrah.

One of my central priorities is the eradication of child poverty. It could not be clearer to people in Scotland that two very different directions are being pursued. The level of child poverty is falling in Scotland, whereas child poverty rates are going up in the rest of the United Kingdom. Under my leadership, we are taking action to remove the two-child limit—that has never been committed to before. That will help us to reduce child poverty, while the Labour Government's action, through the welfare changes that were announced yesterday, will increase child poverty in Scotland.

I make no apology to Mr Harvie or to anyone else about being absolutely focused on eradicating

the scourge of child poverty in our society. It is a curse on our society, and we have to eradicate it.

Acorn Project

4. Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): To ask the First Minister whether he will provide an update on the Scottish Government's latest engagement with the United Kingdom Government regarding funding and timescales for the development of the Acorn carbon capture and storage project. (S6F-04200)

The First Minister (John Swinney): It is welcome that the United Kingdom Government has at last listened to the calls of industry and the Scottish Government and has committed to funding the Acorn project to progress to a final investment decision. We are working closely with Acorn partners and the UK Government to understand the specifics of last week's announcement and how we can best work together to build pace and momentum in the development phase to get a final investment decision on Acorn as soon as possible. To be clear, I firmly support the development of the Acorn project to advance our climate ambitions and create jobs and employment. We are discussing with Acorn what support will be required from the Scottish Government to progress the project further.

Audrey Nicoll: After years of delays, the UK Government has finally announced some funding for Acorn, but it has failed to commit to a timetable or final investment decision on the project. That stands in stark contrast to Labour's £22 billion for carbon capture in England and a swathe of costly nuclear projects. Given that Westminster has had 20 years to hammer out the detail of Acorn, does the First Minister agree that we must now see meaningful support and funding at pace?

The First Minister: I agree with Audrey Nicoll; it is vital that we have urgent progress and support for the project. I welcome the announcement that was made last week. The Scottish Government will play its part in ensuring that we can progress to a final investment decision as soon as possible, because the project is central to the achievement of our objectives on climate, it will be a significant part of the just transition in Scotland, and it provides significant economic and climate opportunities for our country. It should be embraced by all concerned. It needs emphatic support from the UK Government, in particular.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): The Scottish cluster needs meaningful support. Years ago, the SNP promised £80 million to help to bring it online, with no strings attached. Later, the SNP introduced a condition that it would be paid only when the UK Government promised funding, and then the Green Party blocked it anyway.

Now that the UK Government has met the retrospectively imposed criteria and the Greens are, thankfully, out of government, when will the Scottish cluster get the £80 million that was promised?

The First Minister: The Scottish Government's commitment to £80 million remains intact. In the programme for government, I indicated that the Scottish Government would be open to providing additional financial support to ensure that the project is able to progress.

As I said in my opening answer to Audrey Nicoll, we are working closely with Acorn partners to understand the specifics of last week's announcement and how we can best work together to build pace and momentum, and that is exactly what we will do.

Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland) (Lab): The Scottish Government does my constituents in the north-east no favours by making promises that it will not keep. If the First Minister is serious and has been serious for several years about the use of that technology in that site, why did the ScotWind leasing round award seabed rights for the MarramWind wind farm on the very same site as the Acorn project? What is he doing to remedy that?

The First Minister: I will have to take away the issue that Mercedes Villalba has raised with me. The ScotWind leasing round was completed in an orderly process, with decisions made based on the evidence that is available to the Government. I will carefully consider the point that the member has made to me, but I do not think that there is any incompatibility between the approaches that have been taken.

Biodegradable Waste

5. Maurice Golden (North East Scotland) (Con): To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government's response is to reports that up to 100 truckloads of Scotland's waste will be moved each day to England as a result of the landfill ban on biodegradable waste. (S6F-04195)

The First Minister (John Swinney): I do not think that it is acceptable for a large amount of waste to be transported from Scotland to England.

The landfill ban will be a significant step in reducing methane emissions in Scotland. Methane is a greenhouse gas that is around 28 times more potent in the atmosphere than carbon dioxide over a 100-year period. Preparations have already been made for the ban coming into force and the vast majority of councils have solutions in place.

In the run-up to the ban, I accept all partners' efforts to continue to comply with it. I appreciate that challenges exist and I assure Mr Golden that

we are working closely with the waste sector and exploring several options to ensure that we are reducing any environmental impacts as much as possible.

Maurice Golden: The landfill ban has been more than a decade in the making, with an extra four-year delay already, yet Scotland is still not ready. The 2013 recycling targets remain unmet, even though recycling is the solution, in my view. Sadly, incineration has become the default for the Scottish Government.

Next year, up to £75 million in landfill tax will be lost to the UK Treasury, £75 million in revenue will be lost from the Scottish Government, and tens of millions of pounds in cost will be lost, primarily to Scotland's small and medium-sized enterprises. It is the ultimate farce. How is that failure to plan, invest or deliver standing up for Scotland?

The First Minister: Incineration is not the default position. At 62.3 per cent in 2022, the overall recycling rate in Scotland is at its highest level since records began in 2011, so significant progress has been made. Waste sector emissions were 73 per cent lower in 2023 than in 1990. Steps have been taken to address the issue, and I want to ensure that progress is made. That is exactly what ministers are focused on and what public bodies should be focused on, too.

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): In 2019, my colleague Willie Rennie warned the then First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, that meeting our landfill ban would result in waste being shipped across the border to England. His concerns were dismissed. It pains me to say it, but Willie Rennie was right. How would the Scottish Government respond if hundreds of truckloads of waste from England were dumped in Scotland daily?

The First Minister: As I said in my answer to Maurice Golden, the Government is focused on working with public authorities to ensure that the terms of the landfill ban are delivered and secured. That is what ministers are working with the sector to ensure is the case, and that is what will dominate our approach in the weeks to come.

Higher Education (Funding)

6. Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): To ask the First Minister whether he will provide an update on the Scottish Government's position on the funding of Scotland's higher education institutions. (S6F-04201)

The First Minister (John Swinney): The Scottish Government engages closely with the higher education sector on a variety of issues in relation to its financial sustainability. I know that the member, alongside other party spokespeople and the minister, met Universities Scotland last week and agreed on the need for cross-party

collaboration to support a thriving and financially sustainable university sector. One of the key points in that discussion was the importance of protecting free tuition—a commitment that the Scottish National Party Government has made to ensure that students studying in Scotland do not incur the additional debt of up to £27,750 that they would incur if they happened to be educated at universities in England. The 2025-26 budget includes more than £1.1 billion of investment in teaching and research in Scotland's universities in recognition of the hugely valuable contribution that our universities make.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Today's report from the Royal Society of Edinburgh says:

"there remain significant challenges in ensuring those undertaking initial education ... can access the right opportunities to fulfil personal aspirations as well as contribute to the future success of Scotland."

That challenge to fulfilling aspiration is laid bare in data that came out this week that shows that the gap in university attendance between the most and least deprived grew and that the proportion of young people from the poorest communities going into positive destinations fell.

Yesterday, Glasgow Kelvin College, 40 per cent of whose learners are from the poorest areas, told the Education, Children and Young People Committee that it is having to turn away two in three people. The SNP's managed decline of universities and colleges is leaving Scotland's most disadvantaged pupils behind. Why is the First Minister's Government stifling the potential of Scotland's greatest asset—our young people?

The First Minister: The most recent data that I have available shows that 16.7 per cent of full-time first-degree entrants come from Scotland's most deprived areas, which is an increase on 16.3 per cent in the previous year.

Since we embarked on the work to widen access, we have taken a number of steps to ensure that young people from the most deprived areas are able to access university courses. That is exactly at the heart of the Government's commitment, and I am pleased to reaffirm that today.

Since 2019, there has been a 42 per cent increase in 18-year-olds from the most deprived areas entering university, which demonstrates the progress that has been made on widening access to our higher education institutions.

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): From the comments that university principals made at the Education, Children and Young People Committee, it is clear that the university sector in Scotland has become overreliant on international students. Given the increasing global uncertainty, what assessment have the First Minister and the

Scottish Government made of the financial exposure and risk that our institutions face?

The First Minister: These issues are discussed with the higher education sector. I met senior figures from Universities Scotland to discuss those questions a few weeks ago, and my ministers are engaged on that question at all times.

As well as global uncertainty, the other issue that has to be borne in mind is the United Kingdom Government's approach to immigration policy, which is not helping one little bit in all this. It is clear to me, in my dialogue with the university sector, that a more rational approach to immigration, rather than the folly that was started by the Conservative Government and is now being reinforced by the Labour Government in the UK, would help our university sector to navigate its way through these challenging times. A more sensible approach to immigration would help us to attract international students and support our university sector, which remains world class.

The Presiding Officer: We move to general and constituency supplementary questions. The more concise we are, the more members we will be able to take.

Ardrossan Harbour

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): It has now been more than four months since the Scottish Government committed to exploring the purchase of Ardrossan harbour from Peel Ports, but talks appear to be deadlocked. Until the future of the harbour is resolved, Arran will not receive the lifeline ferry service that it needs and deserves, while Ardrossan will struggle.

This afternoon, constituents from both communities are protesting outside the building. The Cabinet Secretary for Transport will meet the protesters this afternoon. Will the Scottish Government now inject some urgency into the process to break the stalemate? Will the First Minister also confirm that there are no plans to remove road equivalent tariff tickets from island visitors, which would inevitably damage our island economies?

The First Minister (John Swinney): On the road equivalent tariff point, the answer is that there are no such plans. The RET has been an essential part of the steps that we are taking to improve connectivity with the island communities, and it has played an essential part in lowering the cost of travel to our islands over a number of years. That was introduced by an SNP Government as part of that agenda.

In relation to Ardrossan, I entirely understand Mr Gibson's concern. This is a negotiation with a private organisation, Peel Ports, and any such negotiations take time. It has the focus and

attention of ministers and of Caledonian Maritime Assets Ltd. The transport secretary has made clear to the Parliament the steps that have been taken, and we will, of course, update the Parliament when the negotiation progresses.

I assure Mr Gibson—he can convey this to his constituents, and I know that the transport secretary will do that in her discussions this afternoon—that the Government is absolutely focused on achieving a long-term solution for Ardrossan harbour, which, from the Government's perspective, remains the key port for the connection to Arran.

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): No ferries have been running from Ardrossan harbour since January, and that will become permanent unless there is redevelopment. There has been no progress in redevelopment, despite that being agreed on more than seven years ago. This is a disaster for the local community. Does the First Minister agree that, if there is no progress, the process for a compulsory purchase of the harbour needs to start by the summer recess, so that redevelopment work can start?

The First Minister: I will explore the point about compulsory purchase, but it has been indicated to me that we would not have the basis on which to do that. I assure Katy Clark, as I assured Mr Gibson, that the Government is actively engaged in dialogue to acquire Ardrossan harbour to enable the long-term commitment that Katy Clark seeks. I give that long-term commitment; I understand the challenges about access to the port and the necessity of redevelopment. The Government has concluded, after years of engagement, that the only way to progress that is acquisition. That is what the Government intends to do, and we are taking every step to enable that to be the case.

Migration to Universal Credit

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): The Department for Work and Pensions assured people that the managed migration from legacy benefits to universal credit would be smooth. My constituents in Motherwell and Wishaw have contacted me regarding being threatened with sanctions if they do not provide a general practitioner fit note within seven days, despite previously receiving employment and support allowance. That should not happen. It is causing needless pressure on primary care and fear and anxiety for my constituents with long-term health conditions. Will the First Minister engage with the United Kingdom Government on those reported issues and on the delays in migration from legacy benefits to universal credit?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice recently wrote to the UK Government to highlight a number of

issues with the delivery of universal credit, including those caused by conditionality and sanctions. We are deeply concerned about the personal impact that the move to universal credit is having on individuals, and we will continue to work with the DWP to address all those concerns.

The situation is indicative of the agenda that is being taken forward by the Labour Government, which is now trying to balance the books on the back of sacrificing the poor and the vulnerable in our society. I do not think that people in Scotland expected that of a Labour Government, but that is what they are getting.

Urgent Care Services (Skye)

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): It has been just over a year since John Swinney publicly apologised to Eilidh Beaton for what he described as her “terrifying experience” at Portree hospital on Skye. He said that it was “not good enough” and that Sir Lewis Ritchie’s recommendations on restoring urgent care “must be implemented”—he claimed that that is what would happen.

However, a year later, incidents keep happening and, last week, NHS Highland admitted that the current model for urgent care is not working. Skye SOS national health service campaigners told the *West Highland Free Press* that it was “shambolic”. One said:

“They have been pulling the wool over our eyes all this time.”

John Swinney was in Skye on Monday, pressing the flesh for a Scottish National Party by-election campaign. To their disappointment, he did not meet local health campaigners. Why did the First Minister not find time to meet those who are fighting to get urgent care restored at Portree hospital? Does he accept that the promises that he made to the people of Skye, which were made in this chamber, have not been delivered? When will they be delivered?

The First Minister (John Swinney): As a matter of factual accuracy, I was in Portree on Saturday, and I met Eilidh Beaton there on Saturday. I heard about her experience, and it was a pleasure to meet her. I was able to express to Eilidh and to other members of the public who asked me about the issue that the commitments that I gave in this chamber on the delivery of the model that was designed by Lewis Ritchie will be fulfilled.

I accept that there are challenges for NHS Highland in the practical delivery of that, often because of the availability of personnel to do it. It is part of a wider and deeper problem, which also relates to the point that I made to Mr Briggs a moment ago that we are being constrained in the

delivery of our public services by the approach to immigration and the size of our working-age population. That is a very hard reality that the Parliament is going to have to come to terms with and which is troubling me enormously.

I say two things to Mr Halcro Johnston. First, I appreciate the engagement that I had with members of the public in Portree on Saturday about the issue. Secondly, I reaffirm the Government's commitment to the model that was designed by Lewis Ritchie and which I expect NHS Highland to implement.

Professor Sir Geoff Palmer

Foyso Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): Last week, Professor Sir Geoff Palmer, Scotland's first black professor, passionate advocate for equality, and my friend, passed away. Sir Geoff was not only a leader in science and human rights; he was a kind, wise man who inspired me and many others. He will be deeply missed. Will the First Minister join me in paying tribute to Sir Geoff, a giant of modern Scotland, and will he continue Sir Geoff's legacy by helping to build a Scotland that is free from prejudice? *[Applause.]*

The First Minister (John Swinney): I associate myself unreservedly with Mr Choudhury's comments about Sir Geoff Palmer. Sir Geoff was a pioneer—that is how I described him on his death. He contributed enormously to making Scotland the country that it is today: the tolerant, inclusive and welcoming country that is epitomised by the approach and the values of Sir Geoff Palmer.

Mr Choudhury described Sir Geoff as a kind, wise man. I utterly accept that. That is exactly the right description of him. We need more kindness and more wisdom in our society, and Sir Geoff Palmer embodied that. I take this opportunity to make clear to the Parliament my absolute commitment to making sure that Scotland is a tolerant, welcoming and inclusive country that Sir Geoff Palmer could be proud of.

Economic Growth Forecast

Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): This week, the Confederation of British Industry has downgraded its growth forecast for the United Kingdom, warning that rising costs, including the Labour Government's national insurance tax hike, are set to cause weak business investment, reduce recruitment and reduce economic growth over the next two years. Does the First Minister share my concern about the impact that Westminster economic mismanagement will have on the ability of this Scottish National Party Scottish Government to grow our economy?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The points that Michelle Thomson puts to the Parliament are

absolutely valid. The warning from the CBI should not be ignored. When the decision was taken to apply employer national insurance contribution increases, I said that I thought that it was an illogical move, given the focus on growth in the United Kingdom Government's agenda. I reiterate that point: employer national insurance contribution increases will stifle growth and they will inhibit our ability to grow the economy.

The survey from the CBI comes in a week in which EY has confirmed that Scotland is the best-performing part of the United Kingdom for inward investment, outside London, for the 10th year in a row. Despite all the obstacles put in our way by a Labour United Kingdom Government that does not act in relation to growth and opportunity in our economy, the decisions of this SNP Government are delivering prosperity and opportunity for people in Scotland. That record on investment—10 years in a row of being the most successful part of the United Kingdom for inward investment, outside of London—is a testament to the efforts of this Government.

Train Cancellations

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Numerous trains have been cancelled across my region in the past year. That has a massive knock-on effect on individuals, organisations and businesses. It has been more than three years since the Scottish National Party Government took over responsibility for ScotRail, but, unfortunately, we have yet to see real improvements.

If the First Minister wants to reduce carbon emissions, and get people out of their cars and on to public transport, the Scottish Government must provide a reasonable and reliable service. When will that dream become a reality?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I cannot believe half of what has been put to me in that question. ScotRail is one of the best-performing rail networks in the United Kingdom, and its performance has improved since it was taken into public ownership by the Scottish Government. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear one another.

The First Minister: I will say those things again. ScotRail is one of the best-performing rail networks in the United Kingdom, and its performance has improved since it came into public ownership.

We have just taken a decision to abolish peak rail fares in Scotland to encourage more people to use the train. Why can Mr Stewart not find something to welcome in the Scottish Parliament, rather than coming here with bogus information

that runs down the rail network, which is actually performing very well?

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

12:45

Meeting suspended.

12:47

On resuming—

Action Mesothelioma Day 2025

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-17647, in the name of Marie McNair, on action mesothelioma day 2025. The debate will be concluded without any question being put. I invite members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament recognises Action Mesothelioma Day 2025, which is on 4 July 2025; understands that mesothelioma is a rare cancer that is usually caused by exposure to asbestos, with tiny fibres getting into the lungs and damaging them over time; notes that the cancer most commonly occurs in the lining of the lung, but can also occur in the lining of the abdomen and the lining of the heart, with symptoms including shortness of breath, chest pain, coughing and tiredness; understands that there are around 2,700 new mesothelioma cases in the UK every year, including around 200 in Scotland; recognises that Action Mesothelioma Day is a national event to raise awareness of asbestos and mesothelioma, raise vital funds to support the research into tackling mesothelioma, and to remember and support those who have been affected by the disease; notes with concern what it sees as the time bar injustice for mesothelioma victims and welcomes the Scottish Law Commission report, *Report on Damages for Personal Injury*, published in December 2024, which recommends that "an asymptomatic condition such as pleural plaques will no longer result in a time bar preventing recovery of damages for a later-developing symptomatic condition such as mesothelioma"; applauds the long-standing and ongoing work of the Clydebank Asbestos Group, which has provided information and support to people with asbestos-related conditions for over 30 years; notes the calls for continued research into mesothelioma, and hopes for a successful Action Mesothelioma Day 2025.

12:48

Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): I am pleased to lead, for a fourth year, the debate on action mesothelioma day. Members will know the huge importance of the issue to me and my constituents. The debate is an important chance to raise awareness of this cruel disease and to highlight where we still need to push for action.

I thank colleagues from across the chamber for supporting my motion and for speaking in the debate. The issue deserves cross-party support, so it is very welcome that that has been achieved.

I ask everyone to join me in welcoming people from Clydebank Asbestos Group and Asbestos Action to our national Parliament. It really means a lot to have them here to support today's event. Both groups have been assisting asbestos victims

for many years and have campaigned relentlessly for truth and justice. Clydebank Asbestos Group, which I am grateful to have a close working relationship with, has been working hard for my constituents for the past 33 years, and is always there for victims and their families at the time of greatest need. I am so appreciative to have the group in my constituency, and I will be forever grateful to it for the work that it does.

Mesothelioma is a cancer that is usually caused by exposure to asbestos fibres. I congratulate ActionMeso and all the support groups up and down the country on their efforts to raise awareness of the disease.

Unfortunately, since our previous meso debate, we have sadly lost our amazing volunteer Kate Ferrier, on Hogmanay last year. Kate was a volunteer with Clydebank Asbestos Group for more than five years and, shortly after joining, took up the post of secretary. Kate's passing is a huge loss and she will be incredibly missed by all who knew her. Kate chose to volunteer with CAG when she retired, and was drawn to the charity because of her support for her father, following a diagnosis of an asbestos-related disease. I am so grateful for Kate's dedication and commitment to supporting victims of asbestos exposure and their families over many years.

Clydebank, which is my home town and part of my constituency, has an appalling asbestos legacy. It was once described as the mesothelioma capital of Europe. That is why action mesothelioma day is so important to my constituents and our town. Held this year on 4 July, it is a national event to raise awareness of asbestos and mesothelioma, to raise vital funds to support research into tackling mesothelioma and to remember and support those who have been impacted by the disease.

In last year's debate, I highlighted the disgraceful three-year time bar that has denied justice for those who receive a diagnosis of mesothelioma. That time bar means that, if a person is diagnosed with pleural plaques—a usually asymptomatic condition—they have three years to raise a claim for damages, even if they later develop mesothelioma. That is an appalling injustice, so it is welcome that the Scottish Law Commission has published a report on the issue, which recommends resolving the pleural plaques time bar problem so that an asymptomatic condition such as pleural plaques will no longer result in a time bar preventing recovery of damages for a later developing symptomatic condition such as mesothelioma.

The potential for people to be denied justice because of the three-year time bar has no place in a just compensation system, which is why I have secured a meeting with Clydebank Asbestos

Group and the Minister for Victims and Community Safety, Siobhian Brown, to progress the issue. We want the Scottish Government to implement the recommendations as soon as possible, because justice delayed is justice denied.

My partnership with Clydebank Asbestos Group is strong and has shared goals in the campaign for truth and justice on issues such as a more compassionate and responsive social security system compared with the system previously provided by the Department for Work and Pensions, and the phased removal of asbestos from public buildings, starting with schools. I am firmly on CAG's side in support of the Cape must pay campaign. Never has there been a stronger example of greed for private profit being put before the safety of workers. Unfortunately, that is the motivating factor in so many cases of asbestos exposure and the exploitation of workers. The campaign demands that Cape Intermediate Holdings, which is owned by Altrad, donates £10 million to mesothelioma research.

Cape Intermediate Holdings was one of the largest asbestos companies in the world and was reported to have played a large part in the increase of asbestos-related diseases and mortality across the UK. After a lengthy court battle, documents were obtained proving that Cape hid the true dangers of its asbestos products in the 1960s and 1970s, resulting in many people dying. Altrad has a moral obligation to right some of that wrong, and donating to research would be a good start. It has so far refused to meet those demands, but Clydebank Asbestos Group has been pushing forward tirelessly with the campaign. It recently attended protests at the rugby world cup, which featured two teams that were sponsored by Altrad.

Along with Clydebank Asbestos Group, I will continue to push to see justice achieved from Cape. The time is now to support victims. They cannot wait any longer, because time is not on their side. I will soon bring a motion to Parliament on the issue, with wording agreed with the Clydebank Asbestos Group and other campaigners. I hope that, like the motion today, it will receive the widest possible cross-party support. Action mesothelioma day serves as a chance to commemorate all those who have been lost to this cruel disease. In Clydebank, we have the international asbestos memorial, which sits in the centre of Clydebank, in Truth and Justice Square.

Clydebank Asbestos Group recently opened an online memorial, which was launched on international workers memorial day. The online memorial is open to anyone who would like to commemorate a loved one who has died from an asbestos-related illness. That is such a great way

to remember those we have lost, and I commend the group for it.

We must deal with asbestos on all fronts, and we must support those who are diagnosed with mesothelioma and other asbestos-related illnesses by offering help when it is needed. I promise that I will continue to do everything in my power to work to achieve everything that we can in our fight for truth and justice.

12:55

Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): I thank Marie McNair for bringing today's debate to the chamber, marking action mesothelioma day 2025. I commend her long-standing commitment to this deeply important cause.

On 4 July, we will once again pause to reflect, raise awareness and, crucially, demand action. Mesothelioma is a cruel and relentless disease. It is relatively rare, yes, but it is far from irrelevant. It is a cancer that is caused almost entirely by exposure to asbestos—those invisible fibres that embed themselves in lungs, silently wreaking havoc over decades.

As we have heard, there are currently around 200 cases annually in Scotland, but behind every statistic is a family, a community and, often, a story of unnecessary suffering. Tragically, the face of mesothelioma is changing. Once it was seen largely in men who worked in heavy industry, such as shipyards, power stations and construction, but now there are more women, more young people and more individuals from non-traditional sectors—teachers, hospital workers and people in clerical roles—who have been exposed unknowingly and often decades ago.

I want to recognise the work of Action on Asbestos, which was formerly Clydeside Action on Asbestos. It is a remarkable organisation that has, for more than 30 years, stood by those affected, not just with practical support and legal advice—although it does that tirelessly—but by working directly with NHS Scotland, funding specialist nurses and vital research to improve treatment and outcomes. The work is not only compassionate but critical.

Turning to the issue of the time bar in relation to asbestos-related conditions, although the Damages (Asbestos-related Conditions) (Scotland) Act 2009 rightly recognises that asymptomatic conditions such as pleural plaques, pleural thickening and asymptomatic asbestosis are actionable harms, we still face a serious problem. Under the current law, a person who has already claimed for an asbestos-related condition may find themselves barred from seeking further damages if they later develop mesothelioma, which is an incurable and life-limiting cancer.

In recognition of that issue, the Scottish Law Commission in its December 2024 report recognised that, and I put on the record my thanks to it for its comprehensive work on the issue. The recommendation is crystal clear: asymptomatic conditions should not trigger the time bar for the later development of symptomatic conditions. I believe that that is a vital step towards fairness, and I welcome it.

I have spoken to the Government on that issue, and there is a need—perhaps even a duty—to consider whether a legislative amendment or regulatory action is required to address that loophole and ensure that those living with mesothelioma are not penalised by legal technicalities. I ask the minister to consider meeting me and Marie McNair to discuss how we can progress the matter. Those affected do not have the luxury of time. They deserve dignity, clarity and justice.

I close by paying tribute once again to Clydebank Asbestos Group, Action on Asbestos and every campaigner who has fought so hard, often while battling illness. Let action mesothelioma day 2025 not be just a day of remembrance; let it be a day of renewed resolve to right the wrongs of the past and protect future generations from a legacy that should never have been theirs and ours.

12:59

Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): I thank Marie McNair for bringing such an important topic to the chamber. Action mesothelioma day is dedicated to raising awareness of a devastating disease that has affected many lives in Scotland and beyond.

In 2022, there were 2,257 mesothelioma deaths in the United Kingdom, with a significant number occurring in Scotland. Scotland's industrial history, particularly of shipbuilding and construction, has left a legacy of asbestos exposure, leading to high rates of mesothelioma. More than 70 per cent of such deaths occur in individuals aged over 75, which highlights the disease's long latency period.

According to the Scottish mesothelioma network's 2023 clinical audit report, the number of newly diagnosed mesothelioma patients in Scotland that year was 132, which represented an increase on the 127 patients identified in the 2022 audit. However, behind those numbers are real people and their families who are enduring immense suffering. Those people are not just statistics; mesothelioma is a painful reality for many. The symptoms are debilitating; the prognosis is often grim; and patients and their loved ones face physical, emotional and financial hardship.

The stories that we hear remind us of the urgent need for action and support. I have had the privilege of meeting organisations that specialise in mesothelioma, such as Clydebank Asbestos Group in my West Scotland region. The dedication of such organisations to supporting those affected by the condition is truly inspiring; they provide crucial services such as legal advice, emotional support and advocacy for better healthcare services, and their work ensures that patients and their families do not face the battle alone.

Clydebank Asbestos Group offers a lifeline to many. It assists people with navigating the complex legal landscape in order to secure compensation for victims; it runs support groups that provide a space for individuals to share their experiences and to find solace in a community that understands their struggles; and its advocacy efforts have led to improvements in healthcare policies and increased funding for research on the condition.

The group has called for the safe and urgent removal of asbestos from all public buildings, as there have been increases in the numbers of younger people and women being diagnosed with the condition. Some of those people never worked in the traditional industries that are usually associated with asbestos exposure; indeed, some are working in public buildings.

The group is also a strong advocate of the Cape must pay campaign, which aims to make Altrad Cape pay £10 million towards research into the condition. Cape Intermediate Holdings was one of the largest asbestos companies in the world, and its asbestos products were widely used in construction. The campaign argues that those products lie at the heart of the epidemic of the condition in the UK.

However, the fight against mesothelioma requires more than just the efforts of dedicated organisations. We need a concerted effort by the Government to implement stricter regulations on asbestos and to fund research for better treatments. Public awareness campaigns are also essential in educating people about the dangers of asbestos and the importance of early detection.

Let us honour those who have lost their lives to mesothelioma by committing to action. Let us support the organisations that are making a difference and call on the Scottish Government to take stronger measures. Together, we can raise awareness, support those who are affected and work towards a future in which mesothelioma is no longer a threat.

13:04

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): I thank Marie McNair for bringing this important debate to

the chamber. On behalf of Scottish Labour, I welcome action mesothelioma day 2025, which will be marked on 4 July. In my years in Parliament, I have been pleased to stand with Marie McNair and other members to play my part in raising awareness of this cruel condition, calling for further research and calling for the condition to be properly understood as an industrial injury.

Of course, as other speakers in the debate have said, we must ensure that proper compensation is afforded to sufferers and their families. Mesothelioma is a rare and hard-to-treat form of cancer. As stated in the motion, it is usually caused by exposure to asbestos. However, we also know, having debated the issue many times in the Parliament, that, despite asbestos having been banned more than a quarter of a century ago, many continued—and continue—to work in environments where it was and is present. Indeed, it is still found in buildings right across Scotland.

We must address the issue. With 2,700 new cases diagnosed every year in the UK, and 200 in Scotland, it remains of the utmost importance that we raise awareness of the symptoms of the illness and encourage people to be cautious and to get any symptoms checked. As with other forms of cancer, identifying the illness quickly can prolong life and ensure more pain-free management of a cruel disease.

I have known about the disease from a very young age, having grown up in a working-class mining community. According to the most up-to-date data that I could find about my home area in East Ayrshire, there were significant numbers of mesothelioma deaths between 1981 to 2019, as well as a continuation of deaths past that date, with the on-going impact of asbestos exposure. It is important that I, as a member who represents an area with a high rate of asbestos, ensure that we properly document the rates of illness and death, and I commit to doing so. The reality for the people in my area is that the industrial work—mainly mining—in the early part of the last century, and right up until the 1980s and 1990s, exposed men, in particular, to asbestos. However, as has been mentioned by other members, we know that secondary exposure through the washing of clothing, a job often undertaken by women, increased the risk to their health, too.

Many people who suffered exposure to asbestos during their working life have never received any serious compensation, often due to employers jumping through hoops to claim that the cause of their cancer cannot be properly proven. That is why the work of groups such as Clydebank Asbestos Group, Action on Asbestos and other community action groups is so important. Their fight against big business is second to none, and we must always recognise it. This condition, and

others, have exposed the approach that big business and the insurance giants take to workers' health, and we must make it clear that people are worth more and that working-class people—the men and women who have built and maintained our country—must be compensated, should their lives be impacted by or lost due to the nature of their work.

Of course, I welcome the Scottish Law Commission's report, which was mentioned by Marie McNair. However, although it is an important step, I fear that there is more work to do, and I call on the minister to give us, as Marie McNair asked, some feedback so that we can keep fighting to get this right. It is important, too, that we keep fighting for proper compensation and—importantly—for proper health and safety in workplaces to ensure that the rights of workers are at the centre of all that we do.

13:08

Jackson Carlaw (Eastwood) (Con): I find it almost extraordinary that it has been about 18 years since I was first able to contribute to a debate on mesothelioma. That debate was led by Gil Paterson, Marie McNair's predecessor in Clydebank, and at this point, I want to pay tribute to Clydebank Asbestos Group. Its sustained focus, and the fact that its members turn out in numbers when the condition is discussed, are quite remarkable and to be commended, as is the compassion that its members bring to the work and to the lives of those who subsequently suffer.

Is it not extraordinary that this is yet another of those conditions, such as aortic aneurysms or Duchenne muscular dystrophy, that seem, all too tragically, to have a home in Scotland? Of the 2,700 new cases diagnosed each year, about 200 are in Scotland, and our nation endures one of the highest incidence rates of mesothelioma anywhere in the world.

When I last participated in a debate on this issue, little did I know that my uncle would die of mesothelioma, which he did a few years ago. Alan Carlaw was in the motor industry, as was I. He had the British Leyland franchise, and we had the Ford franchise, which proved to be the more reliable of the two in the fullness of time. Those businesses, like many others, were housed in architecture that was built at a time when asbestos was a prevailing building material. It was back in the 1970s that our business sought to clear the asbestos out of our buildings, and we saw just how ridiculously it had been used as a manufacturing substance and how it had deteriorated. I remember that one could see the asbestos dust in the air.

Many people were involved in industries in which being around asbestos was absolutely part of their working day. They built Scotland in good faith, not recognising that they were doing so in an environment that would subsequently kill them. That is a great injustice and a huge tragedy, not least because for many people, including my uncle, pleural plaques did not manifest as part of the disease until they were much older—that happened decades after my uncle's exposure to asbestos. I was in the motor industry, too, so perhaps I, too, have pleural plaques—I just do not know.

Dying in the way that my uncle did was such an unjust way for anyone to end their life. For those people who end up having to suffer and die of mesothelioma, it is an absolutely ghastly experience. We know that they drown, in effect, in great distress. There is no soft answer, and there is no cure.

Members might not imagine this to be true, but East Renfrewshire, where my leafy constituency of Eastwood lies, has the fourth-highest ratio of mesothelioma deaths to road traffic deaths in the country. However, the public focus on road traffic deaths, road traffic management and road traffic accident prevention is huge. When we consider the incidence of mesothelioma that we are still seeing each year, the lack of public awareness of the disease and the suggestion that it is just a Scottish disease—well, not a Scottish disease as such, but a disease that, along with certain other conditions, has a higher incidence in Scotland than elsewhere—should not be obstacles to our making a renewed national effort to ensure that appropriate research is undertaken and our seeking to get to a point at which there is, indeed, a cure.

The absence of a cure, the on-going lack of awareness of the condition and the lack of energy and urgency behind an attempt to find a cure are nothing short of a national disgrace. The people who built Scotland deserve better, and the people who might yet contract mesothelioma ought to know that a national effort is being undertaken to make it possible for them to survive the disease, should it manifest itself, through the identification and implementation of a cure.

13:12

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

I thank Marie McNair for bringing this motion to Parliament today. Once again, she is acting not as an unconsidered representative of her party but as a diligent and democratic representative of her constituents, because the working class of

Clydebank know better than anyone about the suffering that is caused by negligent industrial-scale exposure to asbestos at work.

Let us be absolutely clear about this: this is not a debate about history. As we debate this motion in the Scottish Parliament this afternoon, and as we mark action mesothelioma day on 4 July, the number of asbestos-related cases in Scotland's communities is not falling—it is rising. The evidence from practitioners advising the Scottish Law Commission is that more than 700 people are diagnosed with pleural plaques in Scotland every year, and that this number might not yet have peaked. That is why the Scottish Law Commission's recommendation in its "Report on Damages for Personal Injury", published last December, which at last resolves the time-bar problem, must now be enacted.

By its own admission, the Law Commission draws heavily on the case that was made by Unite the Union and articulated by its solicitors, Thompsons. Their submission argued this:

"Individuals should not be disproportionately penalised for failure to raise court proceedings for a relatively minor injury when they ... go on to develop a serious and potentially life-threatening illness as a result of the same negligent act."

The Law Commission has made a strong and unambiguous recommendation, and the Scottish Government and this Parliament must act with the same clear thinking and with the same fortitude, and they must act without delay, because for all of those families and all of those workers, enough time has already been wasted. That is why I call on the minister today in Parliament not to meet me but to give them an unequivocal guarantee that the Government will amend the Prescription and Limitation (Scotland) Act 1973, in line with the Scottish Law Commission's recommendation, before the end of this parliamentary session.

One of the greatest influences on my politics and in my life was my old friend and comrade Alex Falconer, who was a member of the European Parliament, a community campaigner, a socialist, a peace activist, a dockyard worker and a trade unionist to his core. He won a test case in the late 1980s when he was diagnosed with pleural plaques after working with asbestos as a lagger in Rosyth dockyard. I remember the two of us going to meet the Transport and General Workers Union's lawyers in Glasgow, going to meet Hugh Campbell QC in the splendour of Edinburgh's new town, and then meeting him again on the steps of the High Court in Edinburgh just days later, to be told that the Ministry of Defence had decided at the last minute not to defend the action.

It was a test case in which the insurance industry was finally forced to recognise that a civil award for pleural plaques could be pursued, and

to do so did not close the door on a later damages claim for mesothelioma. Sadly, that is exactly what happened in the life—and then in the tragic death—of Alex Falconer.

For many of us, action mesothelioma day is not abstract. It is very real, and whether inside Parliament or outside of it, in that battle for justice, alongside the grass-roots campaigners in Action on Asbestos and the Clydebank Asbestos Group, we will carry on. It remains painful, poignant and personal, but it is political as well, and so we will carry on—striving, struggling, yielding to none, facing setbacks but unflinching in our determination. In the name of all those we have lost, we will carry on. We will never give up. We will always carry on. We will carry on.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call the minister, Jenni Minto, to respond to the debate.

13:18

The Minister for Public Health and Women's Health (Jenni Minto): I, too, thank my colleague Marie McNair for bringing the motion to the chamber, and I welcome the opportunity to close today's debate on mesothelioma. I recognise Ms McNair's long-standing support for her constituents and other people who are living with the impact of asbestos. I also acknowledge the valuable contributions from my colleagues today, and I recognise the strong feeling and cross-party support that there is for Ms McNair's motion.

Richard Leonard said that this is not history and that it is happening now. It is always important to understand, as Bill Kidd and Carol Mochan took the time to explain, the underlying history of meso and its current impact on different areas of the population.

I very much agree with Pam Gosal's comments on the lifeline support that the Clydebank Asbestos Group provides for people—and their families—who are living with meso. Its website has a simple, direct video that explains how the group can provide great help and support to families.

Jackson Carlaw raised the important point that these people built Scotland and, therefore, we have a responsibility towards them.

As I might have said before in responses to other debates on the matter, I first became aware of the issue when my husband directed a film for BBC Scotland about 30 years ago that raised knowledge about it in the wider community. From my heart, I thank the people in the gallery for the powerful work that they are doing and ask them to keep holding us to account.

On behalf of the Scottish Government, I recognise all those who are affected by this type of cancer—not just the individuals themselves but

their loved ones. Adjusting to a cancer diagnosis is never easy. That must be especially true for rarer cancers that leave individuals feeling isolated and worried at an already distressing time. Therefore, the Scottish Government is committed to ensuring that people who are impacted by a cancer diagnosis receive person-centred and holistic care. We work closely with Macmillan Cancer Support to improve the service that we offer patients through the transforming cancer care programme.

Improving cancer survival is also a key aim of the Scottish Government's cancer strategy. We know that earlier detection can improve outcomes, and we have invested in several programmes to support the earlier detection of cancers. A number of speakers noted the point that mesothelioma is diagnosed late and requires much more research, and I am pleased that there are currently four active clinical trials open to recruitment in Scotland that are related to meso.

The ASSESS-Meso trial is specifically aimed at collecting more information about people with meso. It will help researchers to know more about symptoms and their impact on daily living so that we can improve care. The Meso-ORIGINS study at the University of Glasgow aims to find out how benign inflammation develops into meso in people after exposure to asbestos. The EXTRA-Meso feasibility study is exploring how exercise therapy can improve symptom control, fitness and quality of life for patients with meso. Another trial, which addresses the point that Jackson Carlaw made, is examining the effectiveness of a drug that specifically targets the build-up of fluid around the lung that mesothelioma causes and aims to make breathing easier for people who are affected.

In addition, a core commitment in the Scottish Government's strategy "Genomics in Scotland: Building our Future" is the development of a sustainable and more reactive funding model so that we can expand access to genomic testing equitably across Scotland and keep pace with the rapid rate of change.

As many speakers in the debate said, we are all aware that exposure to asbestos in the past is known to be a major contributing factor to developing meso. As well as aiming to ensure that we prevent exposure to asbestos, which has been banned in the UK since 1999, and that appropriate medical care is in place for people who have been affected by asbestos exposure, the Scottish Government remains committed to ensuring that individuals have appropriate rights to compensation.

As Marie McNair, Richard Leonard, Bill Kidd and others noted, the current law on limitation, which sets time limits for raising court proceedings, can cause difficulties for people with mesothelioma.

Through no fault of their own, they might find themselves time barred from raising civil proceedings and, in effect, be denied a legal remedy.

The Scottish Government and Scottish Parliament have a strong record of supporting those who have been negligently exposed to asbestos. The law in relation to secondary exposure has developed over recent decades, and we are encouraged to see that those who are affected are increasingly recognised.

The Scottish Law Commission published several recommendations for reform of damages for personal injury in December last year, and I thank it for its work. Those recommendations included changes in the law of limitation regarding asymptomatic asbestos-related conditions. The Scottish Government supports those recommendations and has a proven track record of implementing Scottish Law Commission reports, having introduced four bills this session with a fifth to come.

Where asbestos remains, licences are required to work with it and strict control measures are used, including personal protective equipment such as respirators.

As has been noted, my colleague Siobhian Brown is looking forward to meeting Marie McNair and her constituents, and I note, as she will do, the comments that have been made by Richard Leonard and Bill Kidd. I am content to meet as well, but that specific element does not fit into my portfolio.

I give my sincere thanks to those who provide valuable information, help and support to anyone who is affected by meso or any other asbestos-related condition. I give my thanks to Mesothelioma UK for continuing to raise awareness each year on action mesothelioma day. The Scottish Government will support "Go Blue for Meso" by lighting up in blue St Andrew's house and Victoria Quay in Edinburgh on 4 July.

I mention again and give my special thanks to the Clydebank Asbestos Group and the Less Survivable Cancers Taskforce. The work of the third sector, community and social care partners, alongside that of our national health service, is critical in supporting those who are affected by meso.

I thank everyone who has taken part in the debate, and I look forward to working with all of them to improve awareness, early diagnosis, treatment and clinical research, together with support for action mesothelioma day 2025.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate.

13:26

Meeting suspended.

14:00

On resuming—

Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body Question Time

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): Good afternoon. The next item of business is Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body question time.

MSP Staff (Parental Leave)

1. Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): To ask the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body, further to the response to question S6O-04050, what the findings were of the review of the terms and conditions of staff employed by MSPs, particularly in relation to parental leave policies. (S6O-04832)

Jackson Carlaw (Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body): I thank Mr Ruskell for his question—and I apologise to Christine Grahame, whose stick I have just knocked off its plinth. I also thank Mr Ruskell for his continuing interest in the matter. Although there has been a delay—I acknowledge that—to the anticipated timescale for considering the matter, the corporate body remains committed to carrying out a review of terms and conditions for members' staff. We will consider the matter during the course of this year.

Although I cannot give any commitments on the outcomes of the review, after we have considered them, the corporate body undertakes to ensure that members and their staff are provided with a full update as soon as possible. Any changes that the SPCB may agree will be implemented in time for the commencement of the next session of Parliament.

Mark Ruskell: I thank the member for the confirmation that work is under way.

I attended the dad strike that took place outside Parliament last week. It was a great event that brought together families from across Scotland who are concerned about the lack of parental leave policies—particularly paternity leave policies—more widely in society. I talked to them about the arrangements in Parliament and the fact that, as MSPs, we have provision in our budgets to enable fathers and non-birthing partners to take only two weeks of paternity leave or partner leave. I felt a bit embarrassed about that because although I know that the law says two weeks, I think that public institutions such as the Parliament can and should go a lot further than that. I reflect on my own experiences of having only two weeks after the birth of my two sons, and it is just not enough.

This is the time for the Parliament to lead corporately on the issue and to show leadership. I accept the member's point that the intention and hope is to have something more all-encompassing in place by the start of the next parliamentary session, but I reiterate that it would be really good for members to have a bit more certainty and an update on that. This is a fantastic place for people to work, but it could be a wee bit better if we had—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you. I call Jackson Carlaw.

Jackson Carlaw: That is a perfectly reasonable request from Mr Ruskell. The corporate body would not want to prejudge the outcome of our discussions, but I think that we understand that our provision is not as generous as that for our Westminster and Senedd colleagues.

I confirm that we will be considering the terms and conditions of staff who are employed by comparator employers, including other Parliaments. We will also consider the cost and productivity implications of increasing leave entitlements under the minimum terms and conditions.

It is open to MSPs, where budget allows, to offer any enhanced leave that they choose to offer from within their provision. However, I recognise that that is not the ideal route by which these matters should be addressed. We hope to come back to Parliament on the issue in due course.

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): I thank Jackson Carlaw for the answer to the primary question, and in particular for his mention of on-going consideration, which makes me hopeful.

This Parliament very much values itself as a family-friendly Parliament. However, we have a dichotomy, in the sense that we have parliamentary staff as well as the MSP staff that we are speaking about today. Looking specifically at MSP staff, can Jackson Carlaw say anything about the challenges that can be caused by shared parental leave when a partner is nominated to receive up to 50 weeks of displaced leave? Members can face challenges when staff make such requests.

Jackson Carlaw: Another benefit in relation to maternity, paternity and adoption leave is that members' staff can take shared parental leave and receive shared parental pay. Shared parental leave enables a member of staff and their partner, as co-parents, to share leave and pay entitlements that are otherwise available to the birth mother under the maternity policy. When shared parental leave is applied for, the mother or primary carer of a child can convert up to 50 weeks—as Mr Whitfield suggests—of their 52-week maternity or adoption leave entitlement to shared parental

leave, which they can share with their partner. That enables fathers or primary carers to take extended leave to care for their child. That is a separate provision, over and above that to which Mr Ruskell alluded, which the corporate body will also look at.

However, the corporate body tries to ensure that, in the round, we are a family-friendly Parliament and that we have policies that reflect that.

Parliament Facilities (Interim Policy)

2. Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): To ask the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body what responses have been received from LGBTQ+ staff or organisations that it has consulted with, or been contacted by, since the announcement of its interim policy on Parliament facilities, following the United Kingdom Supreme Court ruling. (S6O-04833)

Jackson Carlaw (Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body): The corporate body has received correspondence from five organisations and individuals since it implemented its interim stance on facilities at Holyrood to fulfil its legal responsibilities as an employer, workplace provider, service provider and public authority.

The member will be aware of letters made public by the Good Law Project and Scottish Trans, which is part of the Equality Network. Otherwise, SPCB officials have responded directly to organisations but have respected the confidentiality of that correspondence.

Patrick Harvie: In previous discussions in the chamber and in a letter to me, the corporate body has said that it has been and remains committed to providing an inclusive environment. The letter says:

“The SPCB's intention is that everyone should feel welcome and included at Holyrood”.

However, the letter from the Equality Network and Scottish Trans, which Jackson Carlaw referred to, demonstrates that the opposite is the case. It says:

“this change will make trans people feel significantly less welcome at Parliament”.

It goes on to say:

“We cannot understand why this decision has been described as one that will bring ‘confidence, privacy and dignity’ to everyone. It will not do so for trans people. It will exclude us and segregate us in the heart of Scotland's democracy.”

I am also aware that the response to colleagues in the staff union representing staff in the Scottish Green parliamentary group has not addressed the substantive points that the union raised. The union says that the response did not address the lack of

initial consultation, the specific negative impacts on trans staff members or gender non-conforming people and the violation of privacy and dignity; nor did it address the criticism of the equality impact assessment and other points.

Given that—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Can we get to the question, Mr Harvie? You are well over your allotted time.

Patrick Harvie: Yes, indeed.

Given that the corporate body is now well aware that it has not achieved its intention of an inclusive workplace, surely it is time for it to think again and rescind that unclear and unfair interim position until a full position can be consulted on properly.

Jackson Carlaw: I will make two points. First, it is important to state that the corporate body is not a committee of the Parliament. In committees of the Parliament and in the parliamentary chamber, politicians are able to debate the rights and wrongs of any ruling that is made by the Supreme Court or any other organisation. However, the corporate body is an executive body with legal responsibilities and the personal liability of the members who sit on it. Even though we are politicians, our job is not to debate the politics of an issue, but to ensure that we are implementing the law as the law is communicated to us.

Having said that, we recognise that the interim stance to fulfil those legal responsibilities is a change. Let me acknowledge on behalf of the SPCB that, for some, that has proved both upsetting and a cause for anxiety and concern for their own wellbeing. With that in mind, managers were asked to immediately engage with their teams to discuss the interim stance, identify any concerns about its impact and support individuals who might be personally affected. It is an on-going process, and our commitment to the wider wellbeing of our staff is embedded in a number of our policies and our management approach.

I understand that the SPCB's response to the Supreme Court ruling has been discussed at recent partnership group meetings, and I am sure that trade union side colleagues will continue to use that forum to raise anything further that they consider would be appropriate for the SPCB to do to support its staff.

This morning, the corporate body signed off the next phase of work looking at how to improve inclusivity for all those with protected characteristics working at and visiting Holyrood. We will engage Holyrood passholders and external organisations representing those with specific protected characteristics as part of that work. That will inform any further changes and will take account of the Equality and Human Rights

Commission statutory code, once it is finalised later this year.

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): I thank Jackson Carlaw for his clarity in responding to the original question. It might be helpful for us to understand why the SPCB took the decision to introduce changes now, rather than wait for the EHRC's statutory guidance.

Jackson Carlaw: As I said a moment ago, notwithstanding the fact that we are politicians who are elected by the chamber to represent the interests of Parliament and colleagues, it is the corporate body's responsibility to fulfil its legal obligations as an employer, service provider and workplace provider, and as an organisation that is subject to the public sector equality duty.

Recognising that the Supreme Court's judgment had immediate legal effect—which I understand was confirmed again to members in a briefing this morning—officials took urgent steps following its publication to review the judgment in detail and consider its implications for services and facilities at Holyrood. That is in line with the EHRC's statement that

"Those with duties under the Equality Act must comply with the law and should be urgently reviewing what changes need to be made to their existing policies and practices."

It is for others to determine how they address their own responsibilities.

Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): Let us be clear—we are talking about the United Kingdom Supreme Court. The law is the law, and nobody is above it. This morning, the EHRC was on a call to MSPs and stated very clearly that public bodies should comply with the law now. Sex Matters has warned that it will come after organisations that refuse to follow the ruling, which will, once again, leave taxpayers footing the bill. Will the Parliament therefore commit to following and implementing the interim update that was issued by the EHRC on the protection of single-sex spaces?

Jackson Carlaw: How other organisations respond is up to them, but it is the responsibility of the corporate body to implement the law and the advice that we receive. That is the corporate body's duty. I have said, of course, that it is an interim position, that a consultation is taking place and that we remain committed to inclusivity. That is the primary objective of the work that we are doing.

Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland) (Lab): I apologise to you, Presiding Officer, and to everybody present for my unacceptable lateness.

Following the SPCB's announcement regarding the interim position on the Supreme Court ruling, the executive committee of the Public and Commercial Services Union's Scottish Parliament

branch expressed its concerns about what it said was a complete lack of consultation with the recognised trade unions. The SPCB claims that it is consulting the unions, but I am told that that is categorically untrue and that the trade unions have not been consulted on the interim position. When will meaningful consultation take place with the trade unions on that position?

Jackson Carlaw: Our obligation was to implement the ruling, based on the legal advice that we received. As I said, we have today signed off the next phase of consultation by the corporate body. We announced the interim stance and agreed to conduct a consultation. Together with officials, the corporate body has been considering its approach to that consultation and, earlier today, we agreed the next steps.

Various activities were already under way to review our facilities and policies to better support people with protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010. Those various workstreams, including the consultation, will now come together under the inclusive Parliament review. We will engage Holyrood passholders and external organisations representing people with specific protected characteristics as part of that work.

Alexander Burnett (Aberdeenshire West) (Con): It feels as though some members are seeking to turn the Parliament's management board into a university debating society—unfortunately, that is par for the course in the Scottish Parliament. Does the member agree that the Scottish Parliament, as an institution, must always take the necessary steps to abide by the law?

Jackson Carlaw: That is the responsibility of the corporate body. As I said, there are committees and a chamber in which the political issues around such judgments can be debated, but the corporate body is an executive body that is liable and responsible for implementing the law as it stands, and that is what it has done.

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

Portfolio Question Time

Social Justice

14:15

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is portfolio question time. The portfolio this afternoon is social justice.

Asylum Right to Work Pilot Proposal

1. Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on its discussions with the United Kingdom Government regarding the asylum right to work pilot proposal, in light of the Home Office reportedly stating that it is unable to commit to exploring the feasibility of the proposal. (S6O-04824)

The Minister for Equalities (Kaukab Stewart): I wrote to the UK Government in November 2024, urging it to engage with us following the publication of our asylum right to work pilot proposal. In January 2025, it responded that it was unable to commit to exploring the proposal. Following further exchanges, the UK Government has agreed to meet to discuss it. I have accepted that offer, but a meeting date has not been scheduled yet. I remain very keen to discuss the pilot and would also like to discuss improvements to the current policy for granting permission to work for people seeking asylum.

Mark Ruskell: Without the right to work, people who are seeking asylum in Scotland are being forced into poverty. Although the architect of this hostile environment is undoubtedly the UK Government, we need to use all of our powers here in Scotland to counter that. The Scottish Government has promised to roll out free bus travel to people seeking asylum, who are, of course, unable to work. However, we have been waiting and talking about that for two years, and we are yet to see any progress on its delivery.

The excessive cost of transport directly contributes to poverty. I know that the minister knows that. Free bus travel would remove that financial strain and help to reduce poverty. As the launch of that scheme is now anticipated, will the minister confirm that it will be delivered before the end of this parliamentary session?

Kaukab Stewart: Mr Ruskell makes the case for the scheme well. After the 2025-26 budget was passed in February, we were able to confirm plans in the programme for government for a £2 million national pilot to support free bus travel for people seeking asylum this financial year. In May, Transport Scotland reconvened a working group

with the third sector and local authorities to help inform how that can be delivered. That included consideration of how to maximise value and benefits from the funding. Scottish ministers previously committed to exploring the extension of concessionary travel for people seeking asylum by the end of this parliamentary session. That exploratory work will continue in parallel with the design and delivery of a pilot.

Tenancies (Domestic Abuse)

2. James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what it is doing to ensure that women who share a lease in a social or private tenancy with their abuser are not left homeless if they are forced to flee due to domestic abuse. (S6O-04825)

The Cabinet Secretary for Housing (Màiri McAllan): As part of the measures to prevent homelessness in the Housing (Scotland) Bill, we will introduce a duty on all social landlords to develop and implement a domestic abuse policy. That should set out how they will support their tenants if they are experiencing such abuse. The duty will include keeping the tenant in their home and removing the perpetrator if that is what the tenant wants. We will update the definition of domestic abuse as it applies in housing so that it takes into account an increased understanding of what constitutes domestic abuse.

The bill will also introduce a duty on social landlords, before any legal action to recover possession of a property on account of rent arrears can be progressed, to fully consider domestic abuse and to support individuals who are experiencing it if that abuse is causing any financial arrears.

James Dornan: Given that domestic abuse is the leading recorded cause of women presenting as homeless in Scotland—it accounted for around 23 per cent of female-headed households' homelessness applications in 2023-24—will you tell us what further specific steps have been taken to ensure that safe, stable and immediate housing options are available to survivors?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Always speak through the chair.

Màiri McAllan: James Dornan is correct. I stress that supporting victims and survivors of domestic abuse is a priority for this Government and, personally, I am very committed to that. I mentioned some of what the Housing (Scotland) Bill provides in that regard.

We continue to work towards bringing into force part 2 of the Domestic Abuse (Protection) (Scotland) Act 2021—by December this year, I hope. The measures in the 2021 act mark a critical shift in preventing women's homelessness in the

first place by giving social landlords greater control to transfer tenancies to a victim/survivor.

As I say, I place great priority on protecting the housing rights of women, children and those suffering from domestic abuse, so I am always open to new ways in which we can do that.

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): During stage 2 proceedings on the Housing (Scotland) Bill, I lodged amendments that sought to strengthen the Scottish social housing charter. The amendments looked specifically at the relationship between social landlords and individuals who they believe may

"have experienced, are experiencing or are at risk of domestic abuse".

Given that the charter was created in 2010, this is an opportunity for the Housing (Scotland) Bill to strengthen support for women, especially if they are at risk of being homeless. I was pleased to hear the cabinet secretary say that the Government will lodge amendments at stage 3, but I hope that she will work with members who lodged the related amendments at stage 2 to make sure that they are agreed at stage 3.

Màiri McAllan: On the latter point, I will absolutely pick up the work with members in respect of decisions that were made to work together between stages 2 and 3. I will be glad to speak with Meghan Gallacher. She mentioned the charter. I think that the bill is just one way in which to strengthen it, but I will be very pleased to discuss that with her.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 3 has been withdrawn.

Housing (Orkney Islands)

4. Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): I apologise, Presiding Officer, to you and those in the chamber for my late arrival to portfolio question time.

To ask the Scottish Government what engagement it has had with Orkney Islands Council regarding any support needed to allow development projects to be taken forward to tackle the reported growing demand for housing in the islands. (S6O-04827)

The Cabinet Secretary for Housing (Màiri McAllan): Since January 2025, the Scottish Government has had 10 formal meetings involving Orkney Islands Council to discuss affordable housing, the most recent of which were with development partners on 5 and 12 June. In January, March and May, the Scottish Government attended housing market partnership meetings with the local authority, key delivery partners and local contractors to discuss the housing strategy and its delivery. To help to meet

housing need, we are providing £3.6 million for the Orkney Isles through the affordable housing supply programme in this year's budget.

Liam McArthur: I thank the cabinet secretary for that answer confirming the engagement that there has been with Orkney Islands Council, which I very much welcome. As the cabinet secretary will be aware, this is a key stage for progressing projects. In that context, I would very much welcome her agreement to visit Orkney to meet not just Orkney Islands Council and its partners but those who are taking forward many of the community housing projects that the previous minister, Paul McLennan, saw at first hand when he visited Orkney last year—I pay tribute to him for that engagement. This is a critical time and, as I said, I would welcome that commitment from the cabinet secretary.

Màiri McAllan: I agree with Liam McArthur. I have stressed the engagement that has already taken place, and I understand that, since the start of this parliamentary session, 144 homes have been completed across Orkney, supported by about £11 million in grant through our affordable housing supply programme. That has been supplemented by 30 homes through the rural and islands housing fund. However, I recognise the ongoing challenges and the demand that requires to be met. I will be very glad to discuss that with Liam McArthur and to visit him and others in Orkney when I am able to.

ILGA-Europe Rainbow Index

5. Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to the recent ILGA-Europe rainbow index of LGBTI equality laws, which shows that the United Kingdom, including Scotland, has fallen from first place in 2015 to second worst this year. (S6O-04828)

The Minister for Equalities (Kaukab Stewart): The Scottish Government is a progressive Government that has equality at the heart of our policies and actions. We are disappointed that the United Kingdom has fallen in the recent ILGA-Europe rainbow index of LGBTI equality laws. The Scottish Government remains committed to delivering equality for all people in Scotland, including the LGBTQI+ community.

Although much of equality law is reserved to the UK Government, our 2025-26 programme for government committed to

“Creating safe spaces for the LGBTQI+ community—funding work that tackles discrimination and upholds the human rights of this group, including through the Equality and Human Rights Fund, and progressing actions within the Non-Binary Equality Action Plan”,

as well as taking forward our commitment to ending conversion practices. We continue to work closely with LGBTQI+ stakeholders as we progress that work.

Evelyn Tweed: ILGA-Europe and Scottish LGBTQ+ organisations are calling on political leaders to lead by example. What steps is the Scottish Government taking to improve the lives of LGBTQ+ people in Scotland?

Kaukab Stewart: I thank Evelyn Tweed for the opportunity to reaffirm the Scottish Government's commitment to advancing equality for LGBTQI+ people and to promoting, protecting and realising the rights of every LGBTQI+ person in Scotland.

We are providing funding of more than £1.1 million to organisations that work to promote LGBTQI+ equality in Scotland in 2025-26. That supports a range of projects to tackle inequality and realise the rights of LGBTQI+ people across all areas of Scottish life. We are working to implement our non-binary equality action plan and take forward our commitment to ending conversion practices, including those on the basis of gender identity.

We will continue to work with a wide range of third sector organisations to ensure that the voices of those with lived experience can help to improve the outcomes for LGBTQI+ communities across Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 6 has not been lodged.

Tenants' Rights (Aberdeen)

7. Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how it is supporting tenants in Aberdeen to protect and enhance their rights to a safe, secure and affordable place to live. (S6O-04830)

The Cabinet Secretary for Housing (Màiri McAllan): The First Minister has been clear that housing is a priority for this Government. Having been appointed Cabinet Secretary for Housing, I am firmly committed to that and, as part of it, to supporting tenants' rights.

The Government has already started to take a range of actions to support tenants, including those in Aberdeen. That includes investing £768 million in affordable housing this year alone, introducing measures in the Housing (Scotland) Bill—some of which I have mentioned—in support of the introduction of longer-term rent controls, strengthening tenants' rights and tackling disrepair in homes.

Jackie Dunbar: The impact that inadequate and unaffordable housing has on child poverty levels is clear. Can the cabinet secretary outline what action the Scottish Government is taking now

and in the immediate future to work towards eradicating child poverty through improvements to housing?

Màiri McAllan: We know how central housing is to tackling child poverty. That is why, as I indicated in my original response, we are investing £768 million this year to support the delivery of more than 8,000 affordable homes, with £16.3 million being made available in Aberdeen.

Since the national housing emergency was declared, we have helped an estimated 2,669 households with children into affordable housing in the year ending December 2024. We introduced amendments to the Housing (Scotland) Bill that will broaden ministers' powers to impose timeframes on social landlords to investigate disrepair, such as damp and mould, and to start repairs, ensuring that homes are fit for purpose for families. That is before we even touch on the work that the Government has done to support the cost of living and to prevent homelessness in the first place.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 8 has not been lodged.

That concludes portfolio question time. Before we move on to the next item of business, there will be a short pause to allow front-bench teams to change position.

Public Service Reform Strategy

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a statement by Ivan McKee on a public service reform strategy for Scotland. The minister will take questions at the end of his statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

14:31

The Minister for Public Finance (Ivan McKee): Today, I am pleased to publish our public service reform strategy, which is rooted in realism, driven by urgency and focused on delivering for Scotland.

Public services are an asset and an investment in our collective future. Everyone in Scotland should have access to services that are efficient, of good quality and effective. Public services reflect the society that we are and who we aspire to be: enterprising, compassionate and forward looking. Well-functioning public services are the antidote to those who seek to divide our communities.

People in Scotland want a fairer future in which every individual and every community has the opportunity to thrive. The strategy that I am launching today is about delivering that future. It aims to unlock the full potential of Scotland's public services, making them more efficient, more joined up and more preventative in approach. It is about doing things better, not delivering less. It is about Scotland leading our own agenda for reform, not following that of others.

Public services matter—deeply. They are the foundation of a fairer Scotland and are essential to our priorities of eradicating child poverty, growing a wellbeing economy and addressing the climate crisis. However, our system is under strain. Demographic shifts and rising demand are intensifying fiscal pressures. The fiscal context remains challenging—the United Kingdom Government's spending review has short changed Scotland by more than £1 billion, energy costs for public services are among the highest in Europe and every public body in Scotland is now impacted by increased employer national insurance contributions. A change of UK Government has changed little.

Next week, the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government will publish the medium-term financial strategy and the fiscal sustainability delivery plan, which will set out the scale of the fiscal challenge that we face and how we will address it. Public service reform is an integral part of the Government's response to that challenge—it is about how we optimise every pound of spend

to deliver the services that the people of Scotland need and deserve.

The strategy builds on the work of the Christie commission, which called for public services that focus on prevention, place, partnership, people and performance. The Scottish Government has already delivered some successful reforms. Since 2008, smarter justice interventions have helped to deliver a 92 per cent reduction in the number of young people who are prosecuted in adult courts. The Scottish child payment alone is estimated to keep 40,000 children out of relative poverty this year. Between 2003 and 2020, our Childsmile programme has halved tooth decay among children and has generated significant cost savings for national health service boards. Our annual £1 billion investment that provides 1,140 hours of funded early learning and childcare has encouraged nearly three quarters of parents to say that it has helped them to find or look for work. The reorganisation of policing into a single body saves £200 million in back-office costs every year.

However, we clearly recognise that we have not delivered the Christie approach to its fullest potential. As a Government, we have listened to communities, to those who deliver services and to the people who rely on them. Despite increased investment, public satisfaction with services has fallen. We know that services can be hard to navigate for those who rely on them most, and front-line staff can feel constrained in their ability to help. That must change. We must rapidly increase the scale and pace of reform, building on the strong foundations that we have in Scotland—our shared vision and shared values.

We need to intervene earlier in order to prevent expensive crisis interventions later. The strategy sets out a bold, system-wide approach to changing how we think and behave across the public service system. It maximises impact across the whole system, not just in organisations. That whole-system approach will enable reform across all public services. That includes the changes that are set out in the population health framework and the service renewal framework, which were presented to the Parliament two days ago. We have taken the time to understand the barriers to systemic change—duplication, fragmentation, siloed working and outdated accountability structures—which, too often, make doing the right thing harder. We have identified the actions that are required to remove those barriers.

The strategy marshals together in one place everything that we need to do to reform our public services. It recognises that reform is a process, not an event, and that progress requires a range of interventions, all of which are necessary. Culture is the public sector's biggest strength, but it can also be a barrier to reform. Leadership is

key. We must allow leaders to lead and to take risks to improve outcomes, and we must hold them to account on that. Empowerment is vital, so we will involve staff, service users and communities in the design and delivery of services to make those services work better.

Prevention—investing earlier to avoid harm later—is easy to grasp but can be hard to deliver. Today, I am also publishing research that shows that Scottish public services have successfully introduced innovative and highly effective preventative interventions across a range of policy areas over a number of years. That research will inform our understanding of the technical and cultural barriers to building a preventative system, including those relating to how we enable the movement of money around the system to support investment in prevention and how we tackle the root causes of poor outcomes and improve lives.

It is key that we join up services and change how we do things to better integrate local services. We need to further develop local partnerships, empower staff and communities, remove duplication and break the cycle of people being passed from pillar to post in order to get help. We will simplify the policy landscape, strengthen community planning partnerships, unlock the potential of the third sector, tackle barriers to data sharing and maximise the use of digital technologies to make services fit for the future. That is exemplified in the whole-family support approach. The Scottish Government is working with local partners to enable greater local decision making and flexibility to support families at risk of poverty. That means that local partners can use resources in the way that they find most effective to support people.

Efficiency—ensuring that every pound of public money works as hard as it can—is no less than people and businesses have a right to expect. Across key efficiency programmes, we have already secured significant cash-avoiding and cash-releasing savings, which are expected to reach up to £280 million over the two-year period to the end of 2024-25.

However, there is much more that we can do. Through the tools at our disposal and the efficiency workstreams in our strategy, we will reduce identified costs on Scottish Government and public body spend on corporate functions by 20 per cent over the next five years. That equates to an approximate annual cost reduction of £1 billion by 2029-30. That will require every part of the public sector to reduce the cost of doing business and prioritise the front line.

All public bodies are already required to deliver best value, but this is about going further and faster. It is about taking all available opportunities to introduce and embed efficiency through

automation, digitisation, estate rationalisation and changing the delivery landscape. That is about delivering significant change, including structural reform in the Government and public bodies when that is needed—not in a headline-grabbing way that simply throws out random targets based on no evidence, but by identifying and delivering the real opportunities for better, joined-up services that will improve lives and redirect resources.

We must be ready to reshape our workforce to enable that service reform. Everyone recognises that things must change, and that creates challenges as well as opportunities for employees. We will work with partners, staff and trade unions to ensure that we have the right number of people in the right roles to deliver real and meaningful change and that—importantly—staff are empowered to make services better.

The Scottish Government cannot deliver reform alone. We are part of a system with huge potential that already shares our vision and values. I have set out in the strategy how we will change our approach to partnership, because the full potential of reform can be delivered only in partnership with public bodies, trade unions and the third sector. Collaboration must be at the heart of our system. The Verity house agreement on collaboration with local government is central to that effort.

Employees are also key partners, because we will not deliver change without them. My message to our staff who deliver public services is this: you are at the heart of this change and are the system's greatest asset, and the strategy is about trusting and empowering you to work across boundaries, to focus on what matters and to shape services with the people you serve.

The strategy is, at its heart, a programme of action. It will be backed by governance, performance monitoring and a clear commitment to transparency. Our public service reform board will drive and oversee that work and has members from public bodies, the third sector, local government and business with experience of delivering transformation programmes.

The strategy is a statement of belief that Scotland can lead and can change and that, together, we can build services that are modern, accessible, flexible, responsive and seamless and that are fit for Scotland's future.

We must be bold and brave to deliver real, long-lasting and meaningful change. The strategy demonstrates that the Scottish Government is ready to go further and faster than ever to reform our public services. I invite the Parliament to support that shared endeavour and to work with us and our partners so that the people of Scotland get the public services that they need and deserve.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The minister will now take questions on the issues raised in his statement. I intend to allow around 20 minutes for questions, after which we will move on to the next item of business. Members who wish to ask a question should press their request-to-speak buttons if they have not already done so.

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): I apologise for my late arrival and for missing the beginning of the minister's statement.

This 49-page, 14,851-word wish list of word soup on the future of public services does not use the word "waste" once, but it does say that the Scottish National Party Government has

"the ability to deliver real change within the public services".

I agree with that, because the Government has delivered real change for the worse in Scotland's public services.

Despite that Government telling us, the Scottish Conservatives, that it would be reckless to advocate for tax reductions of £500 million, Ivan McKee says today that he can save £1 billion simply by cutting corporate functions by 20 per cent in the next five years. The Government says that that is neither an attempt to grab headlines nor a throwing out of targets, but we have been here many times before with the SNP.

I therefore have some questions for the Government. What is the breakdown of the £1 billion in savings? How will those be made, in which departments and agencies and in which specific corporate functions? If that is now so achievable, why has the SNP Government not done it before?

The strategy makes only passing reference to the workforce and the issue of severance, so what size, in full-time-equivalent terms, will the bloated civil service be by the end of this decade and in 2035? The strategy does not mention a single body, agency or quango that is to be cut, so are there any, other than those that were announced in the health service statement yesterday, or is this yet another work of fiction? Is it not time for this Government to stop talking and start swinging the axe?

Ivan McKee: I thank Craig Hoy for the question—I think. It is not unexpected.

I have delivered transformation programmes in the private sector and elsewhere. If we are serious about making real change, it is important to understand the drivers that create the barriers that prevent us from doing that. Just going in and swinging a big axe will not deliver services. We saw that across the Atlantic, where Elon Musk is no longer with the Trump Administration precisely because he went in with a big axe and started

cutting stuff, but that backfired immediately because he did not know what he was doing.

The strategy is about understanding, in a serious way, what the barriers are in leadership, accountability, incentives and culture. It is about taking forward the efficiency programmes that we have already delivered on and that have, as I said in my statement, saved £280 million already. It is about building on the work in procurement, estates and intelligent automation—where we have done some fabulous work already—across the public sector and taking that work to the next level by building on the foundations that we have.

It is right to say that we have already announced one merger of public bodies this week and more of that will happen in due course, but the first step is not restructuring, no matter how attractive that might sound. The first step is to go in and understand where the duplication is and then to remove that and get bodies working together so that we can see the opportunities beyond that. That is where we will get the biggest value, rather than just grabbing headlines.

It is worth saying that civil service costs actually went down in real terms last year, that the head count is also going down and that that will continue as part of this work. The £1 billion savings target is 20 per cent of the corporate costs that we identified in a study that we did last year. We are putting in place budget processes to monitor and control that, and that will equate to a reduction of approximately 4 per cent in each of the next five years. The cabinet secretary will give more detail about that in the medium-term financial statement and the fiscal sustainability delivery plan that will be unveiled next week, and I know that Craig Hoy will wait with interest to see the further details that we will provide next week.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): Presiding Officer, I, too, apologise to you and members for my late arrival. I thank the minister more emphatically than usual for advance sight of his statement.

The one thing that we could not accuse the Government of is rushing into this. It is only 14 years since the Christie commission published its results. Although I welcome the overall sentiment, I fear that this is just a plan for a plan and the creation of another board. The minister said that we need an analysis of the key levers, but can he specify what they are?

Secondly, reform is, to my mind, not about shrinking the state; it is about maximising its effectiveness. We must not ignore the fact that, over the past decade, the civil service has grown at three times the rate of the NHS, while police, fire and college head counts have all fallen. What

will address that and make sure that we focus investment on the front line?

Thirdly, the minister again mentioned root causes. That is an acknowledgement that we have £1 billion-worth of waste. How did that happen and what will prevent it in the future?

Ivan McKee: I know that Daniel Johnson is earnest in his efforts to support reform and make sure that we do the right thing for the interests of everybody in Scotland.

The levers are laid out clearly in the statement. We have done the root cause analysis—and we have attempted to put it in an accessible format in the document—to understand why leaders optimise in their silos but not collaboratively across the system; how, in the way that we hold public bodies to account, we incentivise them to work within their silos and not integrate across the system; how budget processes also incentivise organisations and portfolios to optimise in their silos but not to invest across the system, including, importantly, in preventative measures; how the policy landscape has become too complicated, meaning that it requires to be simplified; and how we can look at structures to enable that to happen. Those levers are clearly set out, but we are always open to discussion on anything else that Daniel Johnson believes needs to be addressed as part of that activity.

On shrinking the state, he is absolutely right. We are not talking about saving £1 billion for the sake of it. It is £1 billion that we can then invest in front-line services. As I said, my colleague the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government will give more information on the detail of that next week.

On waste, I think that Daniel Johnson will accept, given his business background, that this is absolutely a journey. We have delivered some significant savings, which I identified in my statement and in the strategy document. Police reorganisation continues to save us £200 million a year, and there are many other examples in the document. As I identified, in the past two years, we have saved another £280 million through the programmes that we have taken forward.

To unlock the £1 billion, we need to accelerate what we are doing on automation and we need process redesign, simplification and removal of duplication. That stuff does not happen overnight, but we are working through it as quickly as we can so that we deliver real lasting change that will continue to make services better, rather than just swinging the axe and cutting them or making them worse in the short term.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): The minister said that a vital change will be to streamline and enhance front-line service

provision by reducing levels of duplication and sharing where possible. I very much welcome the statement. The public sector landscape is cluttered. We have local authorities, health boards, city region deals, regional growth deals, community planning partnerships, integration joint boards and non-departmental public bodies. Will the minister speak to Scottish Government plans to declutter and, potentially, merge public sector bodies?

Ivan McKee: One of the workstreams in the strategy is on precisely that point—it is to look at the public sector landscape and at Government directorates in the round and understand where there is duplication so that we can take forward that work. As I said, the way that we do that is by understanding at a fairly deep level what is happening, doing the process mapping, and understanding the value stream mechanisms within that and how it interfaces with service users. That is where we identify the opportunities to remove duplication, automate back-office services and further implement the shared service platforms that we are already rolling out to public bodies.

Our first step is to work with public bodies in clusters, within and across portfolios, so that they can share information, data and process mapping and understand where there is duplication. In that way, the experts in the public bodies will lead that work. Public body leaders have been very clear that they are empowered to come forward with their proposals, both within public bodies and within Government, on how we can make the whole system more efficient and effective.

As we move forward, I have no doubt that there will be more proposals for the removal of public bodies but, as I said, the first step is to make what we have work more effectively. Anyone who has run a transformation knows that that is what should be done first, as it will highlight the opportunities for simplifying the landscape, as and when that is required.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We will need slightly briefer responses.

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): This is the sixth debate and statement that I have sat through on public sector reform, and it just shows that the finance committee has been calling for real action for a very long time now. What one structural change coming out of the statement will make a real difference to public sector reform?

Ivan McKee: There are many things, as there are 18 different workstreams, but I will highlight the two most important aspects. First, we need public body leaders to focus on being collaborative. As our statement indicates, that is all about how we recruit those leaders, how we hold

them accountable and how we change the culture to ensure that they focus on making the whole system work, instead of focusing on how individual parts of the system function, which is suboptimal.

The second aspect is enabling a shift in resources to a preventative budget. Everyone is incentivised to maximise their budgets for their part of the silo in the here and now, and they are measured on how they do that. However, that means that we can lose perspective on ensuring that there is preventative spending. Indeed, that is what has stymied our efforts in that respect so far.

With the numbers that we have published today, our statement makes it clear that the biggest savings will come from ensuring that we get prevention right. There are some good examples of that, but there is an awful lot more that we can do. The way in which we currently structure preventative budgeting within the public sector largely blocks that work.

Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP): Modernisation and increased efficiency must be at the heart of our efforts to reform public services, and we must take advantage of the advances in digital technology and artificial intelligence in order to do that. Can the minister outline what steps the Scottish Government is taking to harness the potential of technology to future proof our services?

Ivan McKee: Digital underpins a lot of the work that we are doing and is very important. I do not think that it is the most important thing—culture, leadership and the way in which money flows are more important—but it is absolutely key. Our centre for intelligent automation in Government, which provides services across the public sector, has saved upwards of £10 million already; it has implemented dozens of projects, with several hundred more in the hopper. We are investing more in that service to enable that to happen.

The provision of digital services for service users is hugely important. The digital strategy, which will be published soon in collaboration with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, will identify how we are taking that work forward. Ensuring that we use digital resources across the piece is very important, as we must ensure that we do not duplicate digital skills in different parts of the public sector. It is critical that we ensure visibility of the digital skills and that we reuse code components to accelerate the deployment of digital solutions.

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): The local government workforce has reduced by 30,000 full-time-equivalent posts, while central Government payroll has increased by 73 per cent during the Government's time in office. Does the minister feel that the balance of staffing levels

between national and local government is appropriate? Does that lend itself to his ambition to having the right number of staff in the right places?

Ivan McKee: No. This is a journey and we need to make more progress—and fast. The data indicates that the civil service workforce in total, including contractors, has been coming down for the past three years in a row. That process will continue; indeed, it resulted in a real-terms reduction in the Scottish Government's total operating cost last year.

I would characterise this not in terms of the workforce in central and local government, but in terms of corporate functions and the front-line workforce. The person-to-person, front-line workers who engage with service users are, of course, the most important. This is about shifting the £1 billion in resources from corporate functions to that front-line workforce, and we need to accelerate that work, while working with partners to make that happen in a way that does not cause problems for the system as we are doing it. We want to go as fast as we can, using the tools that I have outlined in the strategy.

Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): First, Presiding Officer, I apologise for being a little late.

Can the minister help other political parties understand who is ultimately accountable for the head count of the civil service? At a recent meeting of the Finance and Public Administration Committee, the outgoing permanent secretary, John-Paul Marks, stated that his role included

“being steward of head counts”.—[*Official Report, Finance and Public Administration Committee*, 18 March 2025; c 17.]

To that end, will the minister confirm that his good efforts on reform, including having the right number of people in the right roles, will be fully supported by the new permanent secretary?

Ivan McKee: Michelle Thomson is absolutely right. Ministers have responsibility for certain budgets and policies, but operational aspects are controlled by those who lead those organisations, and the impartiality of the civil service means that ministers do not have a veto or control over how many are hired, what grades there are and what they are working on. Those matters are left to the civil service, due to the impartial nature of that organisation. The Scottish Government website makes it very clear that the civil service is not, in that sense, accountable operationally to ministers or to Parliament.

I have confidence that the new permanent secretary is in an effective place with regard to the measures that we are taking forward. That is witnessed by the reduction in head count that we have seen across the total civil service workforce

and the reduction in the Scottish Government's total operating costs—possibly for the first time, but certainly in a long time.

The Scottish Government is sticking to its budget in terms of the civil service, which it has not always done, and that is important. I know that the new permanent secretary is committed to working in partnership to deliver on the strategy.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): When the Scottish Greens were in Government, we secured a pilot of the four-day working week. South of Scotland Enterprise confirmed to Parliament's Finance and Public Administration Committee that that has resulted in significant reductions in staff absences, which is good for productivity in the public sector.

I was therefore a bit surprised to see no mention of the four-day or reduced working week or of better work-life balance for public sector workers in the strategy document. Does the Government recognise that the four-day working week and a better work-life balance for public sector workers are powerful tools in our quest for a more productive and effective public sector?

Ivan McKee: The word “balance” is important. I recently met the chief executives of South of Scotland Enterprise and the Accountant in Bankruptcy to get feedback on the pilots that have been run in those organisations, and I learned that the approach has been well received. I have also met trade union colleagues to discuss how we move the approach forward, and I know that they are keen to do so.

There is absolutely a place for a four-day working week, but it is important to understand where it will be effective and its mechanisms for delivery. We are reviewing that at the moment to see where the approach works most effectively, but we will not lose sight of the big picture, which is how we make services more joined up, more integrated, more efficient and more focused on prevention and on empowerment, so that we deliver improved services for the people of Scotland.

There might well be a role for the approach in certain parts of the public sector, for the reasons that the member highlights, and we are reviewing that as part of the follow-up work on the pilots that were undertaken.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): Yesterday, my colleague Willie Rennie told the chamber that public service reform should be boring. So far, the statement is doing a good job of keeping the promise of that directive.

The real path to reform must embrace the transformative technologies that are now at our fingertips. Our universities are packed with

research projects on AI, but risk aversion in the national health service and a lack of dedicated funding mean that such projects are not making it to the front line, where they could bring down waiting times and improve patient outcomes. How does the Government plan to roll out the use of AI and other emerging technologies, where appropriate, to deliver faster, smarter public services?

Ivan McKee: That is the biggest compliment that I have had today, and Mr Cole-Hamilton can reflect to Mr Rennie that I have done my level best to make my statement this afternoon as boring as possible.

Of course, the important point is that our approach is about getting the detail and the fundamentals right—it is not about flashy headlines. Detailed work is what will deliver for the people of Scotland.

On the question of digitisation, I refer back to an earlier answer: quite a bit of work on that is happening already. We have CivTech Scotland, which is a world leader in Government technology solutions and is the vehicle for bringing in private sector initiatives to solve public sector problems. That approach has been copied by Governments all over the world.

The work on further digitisation mentioned in the strategy is already proceeding in relation to improving user interfaces and making the back-office functions of services more effective. There is more to be done on that, which the new digital strategy will identify.

I should sound one note of caution: we need to be careful about how we share data. We very much want to share data, but we must ensure that the appropriate safeguards are in place when we use AI in that regard, building on the intelligent automation work that we have already done. However, the member can rest assured that, working with our great universities, we are keen to move the agenda forward as fast as we can.

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): We all agree that councils have tough choices to make, but some of the cuts, in particular those from the Tory-led administration in Aberdeenshire, have hit vulnerable people the hardest. For example, elderly people in assisted-living complexes have been threatened with eviction. How will the reform strategy make sure that councils put people first and stop balancing their books on the backs of those who need the most help?

Ivan McKee: Ms Adam makes a hugely important point. If we get the preventative agenda right, we will identify where services should be invested in that will allow us to save significantly more later, elsewhere in the system.

Talk about budget processes might sound a bit dry for some people, but it is really important that we get them right so that the money moves to the right place, where it will have a preventative impact. That is not an easy challenge in any organisation and it is far less so across the public sector, which has around half a million people working in it. It is really important that leaders understand that, that they operate in a collaborative way to make that happen, and that there are processes in the background that allow them to do so.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We have come to the end of the 20 minutes that I had allocated, but we have a bit of time in hand this afternoon, and four colleagues still want to ask a question, so I will allow those questions to be taken. It would be great if we could have a little more brevity in the responses as well as in the questions.

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): In the statement, you indicated that the Scottish Government is ready to go further and faster, but how can that be achieved when you already know that workforce planning requires a massive reshaping to enable services to be reformed? That can be achieved only by reducing head count. When will we see the proposals that are to be set out in the Government's fiscal sustainability delivery plan?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Always speak through the chair, Mr Stewart.

Ivan McKee: You will see them when you see the fiscal sustainability delivery plan that you mentioned, which will be next week.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please speak through the chair, minister.

Ivan McKee: I apologise, Presiding Officer.

Mr Stewart will see the plan next week, when my colleague the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government presents it to Parliament.

The member makes a valid point that there will be changes in the workforce. The cabinet secretary and I have made no secret of the fact that it is necessary for the workforce to be reshaped, because of technology changes and the need to get the right people in the right places and in the right numbers. We have been very clear about that in the strategy, in my statement and in our conversations with trade union colleagues. It is important that those colleagues are part of this process, working with us to ensure that the workforce, which is our most valuable asset, is empowered to deliver the change that is required.

Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): As the minister is aware, change on this scale must bring everyone with it, including island communities. Can he provide an update on the

Scottish Government's engagement with stakeholders—including those who are covered by the provisions of the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018—to ensure that, as the strategy is developed, islands remain at the heart of the nationwide transformation of services?

Ivan McKee: One of the great advantages of island communities is that they are self-contained. Because of their scale, there is scope to move reform faster than sometimes happens in other parts of the country.

The work that we are taking forward on the single-authority model with the island authorities and Argyll and Bute Council is very important in that regard. That is one of the reforms that we see great hope in, because it allows us, at local authority level, to bring health and local government services—and other services that are provided in the community—closer together structurally, remove duplication and make it easier to find resource to provide them in a more joined-up way. Islands have a really important role to play in that.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind): Workstream 7 is headed “Simplification”, which I very much agree with.

Can the minister absolutely rule out the idea of introducing mayors? They are the last thing that Scotland needs, because they would be a waste of money by taking money away from front-line services. *[Applause.]*

Ivan McKee: That is the first clap of the afternoon. The member has made a very important point: the strategy is about having fewer processes, not adding other layers of complexity.

The mechanism for that is the regional model, in which local authorities come together—either in city region deals or regional economic partnerships—and the work that we are doing in the health service to allow health boards to collaborate more closely across different parts of the country. That allows us to move faster and to use the experience and skills that are already there without everyone going through the pain of a big reorganisation. Adding another layer to that complexity would take us in the wrong direction.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): I hate to disappoint the minister, but I do not think that he has been boring at all. As one of the very few SNP members, if not the only one, who has ever run an organisation or, indeed, a business, he would realise—*[Interruption.]* Members can correct me later.

The ambition of saving £200 million a year out of a current resource spending budget of £50.5 billion is not a very ambitious scale of ambition. In one of the paragraphs in his statement, the

minister talked about culture change. He knows that we need to bring about a wholesale cultural transformation if we are to achieve the step change that he wants to achieve. How will he do that?

Secondly, will he publish baseline metrics to go with all the savings that he aspires to make in different areas of the operation of Government?

Ivan McKee: On the member's point about savings, I am very clear that that is part of the work that is being taken forward to achieve fiscal sustainability. Next week, my colleague the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government will outline some of the work that we are doing in other parts of the public sector. However, the strategy that we are discussing today is very focused on the almost £5 billion that we identified in last year's exercise. In that regard, I think that a target of 20 per cent over that time period is a realistic and fairly significant target. We will provide full information as we continue to progress that work.

The member's point about culture is absolutely right. We do not change the culture only by talking about it, although that is an important part of the process. We need to get the structure right and to get the leaders of the organisations, of which there are many, working together, feeling empowered and feeling that the Government has got their back, so that they can take risks and try out new things. It will not always work, but we need to work together as colleagues to learn from the process and take it forward. Without the appetite and ambition for innovation, we will not be able to make progress. That is the key to unlocking all of this.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes that item of business. There will be a brief pause before we move to the next item of business.

National Advisory Council on Women and Girls Equality Recommendations

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-18016, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on progressing the National Advisory Council on Women and Girls recommendations on equality. I invite members who wish to participate in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons.

15:07

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): Today, the Scottish Government published its first annual statement following recommendations from the National Advisory Council on Women and Girls. The statement describes the actions that the Government has taken to improve the lives of women and girls and towards gender equality.

There remains much to do to tackle the challenges, barriers and dangers that women and girls still face, but the Scottish Government is committed to accelerating equality. At the end of this afternoon's debate, my hope is that members will recognise the range of positive measures that we have taken towards gender equality in Scotland, many of which would not have been possible without the cross-party support of members across the Parliament.

The United Nations sustainable development goals tell us that

"Gender equality is not only a fundamental human right, but a necessary foundation for a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable world."

Reflecting that, equality for women and girls is a priority for the Scottish Government and is at the heart of our vision for a fair and prosperous Scotland.

The National Advisory Council on Women and Girls was established in 2018 to advise Government and others on what more we need to do to achieve gender equality. It made recommendations to the Scottish Government, which we accepted and are implementing. Latterly, it has focused on accountability and has been scrutinising how we are delivering on its recommendations.

The publication of today's annual statement is a recommendation of the council that is intended to support greater accountability. I extend my thanks to the council and to the empowering women's panel for their work to scrutinise our progress.

I am pleased to discuss the range of important work that this Government is taking forward, but it remains clear that there is much more to do, and we are determined to deliver for women and girls and to address inequality wherever it arises.

In 2021, we published our first women's health plan, and we are currently working on the next phase, which we intend to publish later this year. Our first plan led to the appointment of Scotland's first women's health champion, a new women's health platform on NHS Inform, the development of new endometriosis care pathways, greater choice and access to contraceptives for women at community pharmacies, and the creation of specialist menopause services in every mainland health board.

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): I have a question on the point about the women's health plan. Does the cabinet secretary agree that the situation for disabled women in Glasgow who seek to access cervical smear tests and find that there is difficulty in ensuring that there are accessible rooms for them, including in general practice surgeries, is not an acceptable position? Does she agree that more should be done to support GPs in the national health service to make sure that their services are accessible to disabled women?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I thank Pam Duncan-Glancy for that comment. She points—probably not for the first time today—to a discussion that is exceptionally important, which is about intersectionality. We no longer can or should be talking only about "women"; we need to recognise the additional challenges and barriers that some women face—whether they are disabled women, black or minority ethnic women, or other women—in accessing public services. She raises a very important situation, and I agree that it is unacceptable.

In the next phase of the plan, timely access to gynaecology services will be a priority. We have allocated more than £8.8 million to health boards to target long waiting times for gynaecology, and we expect that to deliver significant improvements in the coming year. In addition, work is under way to target cervical cancer and identify steps that we can take to eliminate it in our lifetimes.

We have invested more than £53 million since 2018 to fund access to free period products across a range of settings. With the Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Act 2021, Scotland became the first country in the world to enshrine access to free period products in law.

We continue to target all forms of violence against women and girls, through our world-leading equally safe strategy and by strengthening the laws that enable us to respond robustly to perpetrators and to protect women and girls. The

Scottish Parliament passed the Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Act 2018, which created a specific offence of domestic abuse that covers both physical and psychological abuse and makes it easier to prosecute coercive and controlling behaviour. Today, the Criminal Justice Modernisation and Abusive Domestic Behaviour Reviews (Scotland) Bill, which is currently at stage 3, proposes to create a statutory framework for Scotland's first national, multi-agency domestic homicide and suicide review model.

We have taken action to create a trauma-informed process for people who have experienced sexual violence, including the Forensic Medical Services (Victims of Sexual Offences) (Scotland) Act 2021. That act provides a statutory basis for health boards to provide person-centred, trauma-informed forensic medical services for people who have experienced rape or sexual assault. Since 2017, we have invested more than £17 million to enable sexual assault response co-ordination services to be provided in every health board area.

We have also increased public sector pay in Scotland, despite significant constraints on our budget. Increasing women's pay helps to reduce child poverty, which is one of the Scottish Government's four priorities. In 2025-26, we are investing £155 million to enable an increase in the pay of adult and children's social care workers in commissioned services to the new real living wage rate of £12.60 per hour. That overwhelmingly benefits women, who make up the majority of that workforce.

Scotland also has the most generous childcare offer in the United Kingdom. Parents of all three and four-year-olds and eligible two-year-olds can access up to 30 hours of funded childcare each week in school term time. Supporting families by providing quality, affordable and accessible childcare supports women in work and keeps families out of poverty.

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con):

On the point of childcare, there are councils across the country that are not allowing eligible two and three-year-olds to access the 1,140 hours of free funded childcare until the beginning of the term after they have turned two or three years old. Does the cabinet secretary realise that that is a problem and that we need to fix it if we are going to encourage women back into work, alongside the childcare policy?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: We have to look in general at ensuring that there is sufficient, good-quality provision that is available flexibly in a way that aligns with what parents need. That is very important, whether for eligible two-year-olds, younger children or children who are at school.

I was pleased to attend an extra time session in Renfrew to learn about the work that is happening with children at school. Flexibility and ensuring that childcare works for parents, particularly women, is exceptionally important—for women and for children. Reducing child poverty is the Government's top priority, as I have said, and it is inextricably linked with women's poverty. We have to tackle the inequality that women experience to fulfil our mission.

During this financial year, we expect to invest £517 million to deliver three benefits to support unpaid carers, the majority of whom are women. Those are the carers support payment—which replaces carers allowance—the carers allowance supplement and the young carers grant, which are both unique to Scotland.

This summer, we will begin to develop an equality strategy for women and girls in partnership with the advisory council. The strategy will identify the gender equality goals that we will prioritise. One of the key messages from the advisory council has been that we need to be better at understanding and reflecting women's different needs and experiences in our policies, for example—as has already been discussed by Pam Duncan-Glancy—disabled women, older women and minority ethnic women. Making sure that we hear from a diverse range of women as we develop the strategy will help us to achieve that.

The strategy will be co-designed with the advisory council and the empowering women panel, which the minister and I have had the pleasure of meeting and working with this year. They are a diverse group of women and girls of different ages and backgrounds whose lived experience informs and enriches the council's work. We will publish our equality strategy for women and girls in 2026.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): Liberal Democrats are very supportive of the work that the Government is outlining today. The cabinet secretary mentioned the strategy that is to be forthcoming. What is her view on enlisting men and boys in the strategy towards the promotion of equality, protection and reduction of violence against women and girls? How we raise our boys and enlist men in the fight against that is absolutely vital.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The member has raised an exceptionally important point. As I look around the chamber, I see that it is mostly women who are here, as is often the case when we discuss such issues. I do not have a problem with that; the more the merrier. However, the Parliament needs to think about the contribution that men make to the debate. We need to consider how we bring up our young boys into young men and the societal norms they live with—particularly

those things that today's younger generations think are acceptable—because that is a large part of the problem that women and girls continue to face. He raised an important point, and I will take it away and reflect on it.

This afternoon, members have highlighted and will highlight areas of concern and areas where they wish the Government to go further and, I hope, some areas where the Government has taken action that they support. It is important that we have this discussion at this time, as the National Advisory Council for Women and Girls wished us to do, so that we can take steps forward to the strategy with a shared understanding of the matters that we raise in the chamber today on behalf of our constituents and stakeholders.

I also hope to ensure that we move forward to our next annual statement, which will once again provide a comprehensive picture of what the Government has done and what it still has to do. Future statements will be informed by the work that will start with our gender strategy and what will come from it.

I am very proud of the progress that we have made in Scotland but, as I said, there is more to do. I hope that members will agree that gender equality is a goal that we must all continue to strive for.

I move,

That the Parliament notes the publication of the first Annual Statement on Gender Policy Coherence.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I advise members that we have a bit of time in hand, so they will certainly get the time back for interventions.

15:20

Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con): I welcome today's debate. It is so important to shine a light on what women and girls in Scotland are experiencing today. There is a mismatch—the Scottish National Party Government's aspiration in this area has not been matched by delivery. Wherever we look, from a woman's earnings to her experience of the healthcare system, women in Scotland are too often still getting a raw deal.

The pay gap between men and women is widening. Women still experience poorer health outcomes for a range of issues. Gynaecological conditions are frequently misunderstood and misdiagnosed, and too many women are still not believed. Too many women are stuck on waiting lists for breast reconstruction and gynaecological services. Women are still more likely to live in poverty. Childcare is often inaccessible and unaffordable for working parents. The number of domestic abuse incidents is rising in Scotland, but

the justice system is stacked against traumatised women, who cannot even find a legal aid solicitor to take their case.

The SNP Government says that it has strengthened the law in relation to violence against women and girls, but it keeps playing for time on making non-fatal strangulation a stand-alone crime. Fiona Drouet is having to take a civil case against her daughter's strangler and abuser, who was given community service after her daughter took her own life due to what he did to her. How is that justice?

The document that we are debating today feels more like an SNP public relations exercise than a genuine, well-intentioned attempt to grapple with the systemic challenges that hold women back. It does not grasp the basics, either, such as protecting the rights and dignity of women and girls. The irony of the SNP Government publishing a statement on gender policy coherence is not lost on the women who have been fighting for years to protect their sex-based rights from the SNP's thoroughly incoherent policies on sex and gender.

What timing, when human rights charity Sex Matters wrote to the SNP Government this week to warn of legal action within 14 days if it keeps failing to comply with the UK Supreme Court's ruling on biological sex. In today's call to MSPs, the EHRC again made it clear that the law must be followed now. How can John Swinney claim that protecting the rights of women has been one of his top priorities when his Government continues to unlawfully deny women and girls their dignity and privacy in changing rooms and toilets?

That is the reality across Scotland's captured public bodies. The public sector equality duty is not working. The SNP Government is repeatedly dragging its feet on implementing the Supreme Court's ruling, and its moral cowardice means that men can still access women's single-sex spaces.

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): I am struggling to understand what path you are going down. What you are talking about is not in the report that we are supposed to be debating.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Speak through the chair.

Tess White: Ms Mackay might like to listen to my speech—if she does, she will find out.

Meanwhile, the SNP's proposed misogyny bill is just the latest in a litany of paused, ditched or botched Sturgeon-era policies. The bill was supposed to improve protections for women against misogynistic abuse, but the SNP has shamefully spent so long contesting the definition of a woman that it claims that the window to legislate has disappeared.

Today's document renews the SNP Government's call for the full devolution of equality legislation to enable us to enact progressive and inclusive Scottish values. In other words, now that the law on women's spaces has been clarified, the SNP is demanding the powers to change it and pave the way for self-identification.

Against the background of the Sullivan review and the Supreme Court's ruling, I want to speak briefly about sex and gender, as highlighted in the Scottish Conservative amendment. Gender is a nebulous word in policy making that is frequently hijacked by activist organisations to promote harmful ideology. Too often, it is conflated with sex.

If we want to be serious about sex-based inequalities, we must use the right words to frame the problem and collect the data to help us to solve it. The NHS is a prime example. Gender markers can be changed with the click of a button. We cannot manage what we do not properly measure. The voices of gender-critical campaigners must be included in Government policy making; there should not be the usual Government-funded echo chamber.

The National Advisory Council on Women and Girls was set up by Nicola Sturgeon, who maligned women for standing up for their sex-based rights during scrutiny of the Gender Recognition Reform (Scotland) Bill. Women and girls feel badly let down by the SNP Government and we have had enough—[*Interruption.*]

Some members might not want to hear this, but they should show respect by at least listening to a speech. Not doing so is bad manners.

We have had enough of tokenistic policy papers, supportive soundbites and the SNP's self-identification obsession. Women want their rights respected, their dignity protected and equality with men.

I move amendment S6M-18016.1, to insert at end:

"; highlights that inequalities still exist for women and girls in Scotland in areas including health, poverty, education, earnings and employment; expresses concern that the Scottish Government continues to conflate the terms 'sex' and 'gender' following the findings of the Sullivan Review and the UK Supreme Court's judgment in *For Women Scotland v The Scottish Ministers*; believes that progress towards equality for women and girls has been hampered by the Scottish Government contesting the lawful definition of 'woman'; regrets that the Scottish Government has scrapped plans for a Misogyny Bill, and urges the Scottish Government to urgently ensure that all public bodies are following their legal obligations in light of the Supreme Court's ruling on 16 April 2025."

The Deputy Presiding Officer: For the sake of clarity, it is up to the chair to determine whether noise in the chamber is contravening the rules on

courtesy and respect. I discourage conversations, but members are entitled to respond and react to what they are hearing, as happens in any debate.

15:26

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): I am pleased to open the debate on behalf of Scottish Labour. We, of course, welcome any and all action to improve the position of women and girls in society.

Although we have seen advances towards gender equality in many areas in recent years, some of the threats that women and girls have grown to cope with have become more insidious. Today's debate, reflecting on the first annual report from the National Advisory Council on Women and Girls, is an opportunity to take stock of the constraints and challenges that women and girls continue to face.

We know that sexism, misogyny and, indeed, violence and threats against girls and female staff in our schools are not being adequately tackled. We believe that there is a particular need for more focus in that area. We support a cross-campus strategy to address sexism and misogyny in our schools. Our young people are our future, and tackling sexist attitudes and behaviour in our schools is key to creating a more equal Scotland. The cabinet secretary confirmed the importance of the younger generation in her response to Alex Cole-Hamilton earlier in the debate, when she spoke about the importance of the norms in our society.

On accountability, the National Advisory Council on Women and Girls calls for change in society's attitudes towards sexual violence and domestic abuse, including evaluation of the cultural landscape around gender power dynamics.

Where are we? In 2023-24, Police Scotland recorded more than 63,000 incidents of domestic abuse, which was an increase of 3 per cent on the previous year, reversing the downward trend that had been observed since the start of the decade. The overwhelming majority of incidents involved a female victim and a male suspected perpetrator. The number of recorded sexual crimes has also risen significantly in the past decade.

Transport Scotland has reported that nearly all women very often or always feel unsafe on public transport, where they feel at risk of harassment, antisocial behaviour and unwanted comments. I have spoken with many women transport workers who have been assaulted or threatened. Indeed, members of the women's committee of the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers in Scotland were in the Parliament last week and spoke about some of their personal experiences.

We have heard multiple times in the chamber about alarming incidents of abuse and violence against female teachers in our schools and against pupils, as well as concerns about many boys' idolisation of sexist social media personalities.

Scottish Women's Aid and other groups have highlighted that any law that is not designed with misogyny in mind and does not have ensuring women's safety at its core is limited in how it can be used to respond to the realities of life for women. I am therefore very disappointed that the Government decided to drop its proposed misogyny bill in its latest programme for government, because that would have been an opportunity for legislators to grasp the seriousness and complexity of the issue. However, let us be clear: misogyny should have been included in the Hate Crime and Public Order (Scotland) Bill from the outset.

Our justice system is not adequately equipped to protect women from the behaviour of men. In 2021, more than 7,000 domestic violence cases were stuck in court backlogs, with almost 70 per cent of the cases awaiting trial being sexual offence cases. The conviction rate for rape remains far lower than the rate for other crimes, with survivors often speaking of their experience of the justice system as retraumatising. Even our police force has admitted to having institutional and persistent problems with sexist bullying. We know that there is underreporting of sexual crimes and that victims simply do not have confidence in the justice system.

I highlight the advisory council's calls for trauma-informed forensic medical examination, independent sexual advocacy and privacy for complainers to be embedded across the justice system. I very much hope that changes that might be introduced through the Victims, Witnesses, and Justice Reform (Scotland) Bill will enable some of that to happen.

We need to look more closely at how women can be affected by multiple disadvantages due to factors such as race, sexuality and disability. I was pleased by what the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice said in relation to that. Ultimately, if we are to move towards gender equality, that means giving women more—

Tess White: Will Katy Clark take an intervention?

Katy Clark: I am just about to conclude, so I am not sure whether it would be appropriate, but I am happy to take an intervention.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You can certainly get the time back.

Tess White: Does Katy Clark think that it is appropriate and proportionate for a male who has committed non-fatal strangulation and systemic abuse against his partner to be given community service?

Katy Clark: I would not want to comment on a specific case, and I do not know the specific case that Tess White refers to. More generally, we must ensure that the disposals that the courts give have the confidence of women survivors, and we know that that is often not the case. That does not necessarily mean that a prison sentence is needed in every case, but it means that we need adequate disposals that have the confidence of women who rely on the justice system.

Scottish Labour welcomes much of the work that the Scottish Government is doing. In particular, we welcome the next phase of the women's health plan and the on-going work that has been undertaken to improve women's outcomes across all areas of health. The cabinet secretary focused on that to a great extent in her opening speech. However, we are concerned that progress has been slow and that significant inequalities in women's health remain. I very much hope that we will discuss those issues further in the debate.

15:33

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): I am grateful to the cabinet secretary for securing the debate. As she has outlined, gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls is one of the sustainable development goals, and it is one that we should all strive to implement.

As Katy Clark has just stated, we must use whatever mechanisms we have at our disposal to tackle misogyny. I, too, regret the Scottish Government's decision to drop the planned misogyny legislation.

Since its inception eight years ago, the National Advisory Council on Women and Girls has been a wise, prescient, brave and visionary body. Its members, including the brilliant, compassionate and much-missed Emma Ritch, realised that progress would require mechanisms of accountability as well as substantive changes. One of the council's recommendations was that Scottish ministers should deliver an annual statement on gender policy coherence, followed by a debate in the Scottish Parliament. It might have taken some time to get here, but we have that statement in the form of a report, and we have this debate, and I am grateful for both of those.

It is commendable that, in its motion for this debate, the Government has sought not to boast about achievements or make excuses about shortcomings but simply to note the statement and

let us talk about it. With the same dignity and respect, most Opposition parties have refrained from lodging amendments to make political points and set the debate on a path of division and conflict—most, but not all.

Once again, our few opportunities to talk about the real structural barriers to the wellbeing of women and girls, of families and communities and of living generations and those to come—our tiny slivers of time for conversation and progress—are to be dominated by the discourse of transmisogyny. Let us be clear: of the social and economic oppressions, institutional and structural injustices and participatory and intersectional shortfalls that women and girls experience, absolutely none is inflicted by transgender or non-binary people. On the contrary, the poisonous rhetoric of prosperous so-called gender-critical activism damages all women and girls, trans and cisgendered.

I go back to the advisory council and its practical, trans-inclusive, intersectionally aware, robust and transformational feminism. It was created as a catalyst for change. That change is not always comfortable, and it is certainly not always easy, but I think that we recognise today, from bitter experience, that it is more urgently needed than ever.

Gender equality is not a zero-sum game. It is not about dividing the cake differently but about baking an entirely different kind of cake—one that benefits men, boys and non-binary people as well as women and girls. It provides radical, sustainable and compassionate alternatives to misogyny, exploitation, injustice and violence—violence in our homes, schools and streets; in the homes, schools and streets of Gaza and elsewhere; in the bleak destruction of climate change; and in the plans and profits of a resurgent war machine.

The council produced 21 recommendations, with on-going, sensitive and meticulous work about how those recommendations can become real. The Scottish Government has, to its credit, accepted them all. If fully implemented, they would transform Scotland for the benefit of everyone—perhaps most of all for the children in poverty to whom our attention continually returns. In my closing speech, I will address some of the ways in which we are moving towards those goals and that gender policy coherence, and some of the ways in which we can do much better.

Meanwhile, on behalf of the Scottish Greens, I welcome the report and the motion, and I wholeheartedly reject the culture-war games that, I fear, we might get into later this afternoon.

15:37

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): I am pleased to speak on behalf of the Scottish Liberal Democrats but I am ashamed that, as the cabinet secretary rightly pointed out, I am one of only four men in the chamber. This issue should matter to all of us. As I said in my intervention, we will only get meaningful progress if we enlist men as allies in the crusade and change the way in which we raise our boys. That is a lesson to all of us.

The Liberal Democrats absolutely welcome this first annual statement on gender policy coherence. It is right that the Scottish Government has responded in the way that it has done to the recommendations that were laid out by the national advisory council. Recognition matters, and the statement recognises that gender inequality is structural, persistent and entirely unacceptable in modern Scotland.

However, recognition alone of that fact is not enough. The cultural shift that we seek towards genuine gender equality demands action and delivery from the Government and from us all as parliamentarians. It demands that women's voices are heard and respected, not only in policy papers but in this Parliament and in the council chambers across Scotland's 32 local authorities. We are still far behind where we need to be, particularly when it comes to female representation in those local authorities.

I would like to focus my remarks specifically on health and health inequalities. In 2021, one in five women aged 16 to 24 reported a mental health condition. When it comes to physical health, women live longer than men—that is a statement of fact—but they spend less of their lives in good health. We have also seen tangible examples in recent years of how women's health concerns are too often downplayed and treated as an afterthought. I will never forget—and I am sure that colleagues will never forget—the injustice faced by the women who suffered the devastating effects of transvaginal mesh implants and how they had to fight to be recognised and compensated. If it had been an implant for males, I am not sure that the fight would have needed to be so long lasting or so strong, but there we are.

The women's health plan that was introduced in 2021 was a step forward. It rightly widened the lens beyond reproductive health and included menopausal care, post-natal contraception and conditions such as cardiac disease—areas that are too often overlooked or misunderstood in women.

Meghan Gallacher: Alex Cole-Hamilton is talking about issues in relation to women's health, but what about young women's health? We know

that young women, particularly those from poorer areas, are less likely to take up the PVG vaccine for cervical cancer. What does Alex Cole-Hamilton think that we can do to encourage take-up of the vaccine by young women, which is a huge issue right now, because it is life saving?

Alex Cole-Hamilton: Meghan Gallacher makes an excellent point. It is incumbent on us all, in debates such as this one, to remind young women in particular of the health interventions that are available to them, which could keep them in better health or even save their lives or protect their unborn children. I will come on to talk about younger women if I have time.

The appointment of Professor Anna Glasier as Scotland's first women's health champion was absolutely a step forward, but for many, the progress still feels painfully slow.

Endometriosis is another stark example of an area that is misunderstood. Too many women continue to suffer for years before receiving a proper diagnosis or treatment. That is not equality of healthcare.

If we are serious about gender equality, we must also transform access to work. Today, women in Scotland are more likely to be in insecure work, stuck in low-paid, stereotypically female sectors, and less likely to reach senior roles, even with the same qualifications as their male peers and even with the policies that the Parliament has introduced. That is still a fact. That must change.

The 1,140 hours of free childcare for three and four-year-olds is key to that. As we know, the bulk of childcare still falls on women, despite our wish to change our societal norms. Across much of Scotland, local authorities are cutting back on that provision by providing free hours from the term after the child's third birthday, rather than from the day after their birthday. That means that many families are missing out on up to four months of free provision. Again, women bear the brunt of that.

The Government needs to ensure that local authorities are provided with the funding that they need to roll out support consistently across the country to avoid that postcode lottery. The last thing that mothers who are trying to return to work need is an unfair roadblock. My party wants to go further by extending funded entitlements so that more two-year-olds get the benefit, with a view to extending the provision to one-year-olds as well.

However, all those policies must be backed with workforce support, proper pay and reliable delivery, or they risk becoming empty promises. That brings me to the unpaid workforce that keeps our society going. In 2023-24, 73 per cent of unpaid carers were women. One in four

economically inactive women cited looking after family and home as the reason for their being economically inactive. That is nearly four times the rate of men.

The Liberal Democrats have consistently championed carers' rights, and we have led calls to make the carers allowance system fairer and more flexible. We won an increase in the earnings threshold for carers allowance, allowing unpaid carers to earn more from part-time work without losing vital support through benefits.

I welcome the ambition and focus of the annual statement, but action and delivery are what count.

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

15:43

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): I am pleased to be speaking in this important debate to highlight the key findings in the report of the National Advisory Council on Women and Girls and on the first statement on gender equality coherence.

The statement is vital in tracking the progress of gender equality in public and private life. It is packed full of interesting and sometimes surprising statistics—there are too many to highlight during a short speech, but I will try to sift out some of them.

The SNP has a proud record of fighting for gender equality while in government, and will leave no stone unturned in its work towards equality. From action on equal pay, support for women returning to the workplace and the first gender-balanced Cabinet in the UK, to taking action to end period poverty, we have worked hard to tear down barriers.

However, make no mistake: despite record investment on challenging inequality and norms, there is still a great deal of work to be done, not least in keeping women and girls safe. I am convener of the cross-party group on men's violence against women and children, which constantly challenges the underpinning issue that affects the safety of women and girls in society—the behaviour of men. Domestic violence is still a scourge in our society.

The equally safe strategy strives to combat all forms of violence against women and girls, including delivering the women's health plan, which we have been hearing about; investing to tackle domestic violence against women and girls and survivors of abuse; supporting women to access fair work; and helping to reduce the gender pay gap. We are also supporting schools to equip young people with the skills to counter the impacts of online hate, including misogyny, and we are

piloting specialist independent legal advice for complainers in rape and attempted rape cases.

A helpful briefing from the Scottish Women's Budget Group states:

"While there has been some movement towards embedding intersectional gender budgeting, progress remains far too slow".

In short, we must do better.

Another overriding issue is the lack of essential data to improve the collection, analysis and use of evidence on gender inequality. I am pleased that the Scottish Government is continuing to work with our stakeholders on that important issue. As a member of the Criminal Justice Committee, I am also pleased that we are currently legislating to introduce domestic homicide and suicide reviews, to abolish the not proven verdict, and to establish a sexual offences court and a victims and witnesses commissioner to improve women's journey through the justice system.

We know that women's poverty and child poverty are intrinsically linked and that women experience barriers in the labour market, including discriminatory practices and the gender pay gap. It is critical that we address that if we are to improve the lives of women. To that end, we are investing £522 million in 2025-26 to deliver three benefits to support unpaid carers. The 2023-24 carers census shows that 73 per cent of carers are women, so that investment is crucial. We have been talking about our childcare policy of investing around £1 billion in high-quality funded early learning and childcare every year since 2021. Doing so helps to combat poverty, and I would like to see it go further, too. The child payment and the scrapping of the two-child cap are incredibly important and are measures that are not available in the rest of the UK.

We published the women's health plan and appointed Scotland's first women's health champion, as well as investing more than £17 million to support a sexual assault co-ordination service in every health board. I agree with the point that Pam Duncan-Glancy made in her earlier intervention on intersectionality and access to facilities in general practice. That needs to be addressed.

As a member of the gender-sensitive audit advisory panel, I am pleased that we continue to strive to elect more women, and I am confident in our commitment to improve women's representation at every level of public and private life.

This statement shines a light on not just what we have achieved but what we have yet to achieve to progress equality in the lives of women and girls, now and for the future.

15:48

Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con): I welcome the opportunity to debate an issue that is close to me and many of my fellow female MSPs across the chamber. Equality between men and women, and boys and girls, should be one of the driving objectives of this Parliament. We need equality in schools, in the workplace, in healthcare and in the economy. Failure to deliver that does not just fail Scotland's females, who account for more than half the population; it also results in a number of missed opportunities for growth, progress and innovation.

Although I welcome the debate, it should also be noted that women across Scotland are becoming fed up with so much talk being matched by so little action. Females may well appreciate MSPs taking the time to debate in the chamber or to set up focus groups or round-table discussions, but we are also aware that, while the talking continues, things on the ground move backwards. The National Advisory Council on Women and Girls made a number of recommendations designed to reduce gender inequality. Ministers recognise that tackling such inequality is key to a fairer Scotland and that

"Women are central to all Government priorities".—[*Official Report*, 12 March 2025; c 30.]

However, in real life, many measures are only getting worse.

Perhaps the most brutal measure of all is the rate of domestic violence in Scotland. Cases are rising, and police now receive a report of domestic abuse in Scotland pretty much every 10 minutes. Women may not be the victim in every one of those cases, but we know for sure that they are the victim in the overwhelming majority and that the attacker is almost always a man and always a partner or a former partner.

It is patently unfair that someone, just because of their sex at birth, is on a pathway that makes them considerably more likely to be a victim of violence, abuse, intimidation, bullying or coercion. Domestic violence is rife in this country and, until we turn the tide, we can never truly claim that things are even close to being equal. Even seeking justice is often out of the reach for too many women. One survivor, who lives in the Highlands, contacted 116 solicitors listed on the Scottish Legal Aid Board's website and still could not find help with divorce proceedings—that is not an isolated incident.

Gender inequality can be seen throughout the generations. Despite performing better in school, learning faster and behaving better, girls are less likely to go on to have well-paying, successful careers than their male contemporaries. In 2024, our gender pay gap widened. There are many

reasons for that, but we cannot blame it all on childcare and the fact that women are more likely to be carers of their children and their elderly relatives. Attitudes need to change in the classroom and in the boardroom. We need more flexibility and more incentives and support for women who want to push up their career ladder in the same way as men.

Despite living longer, women experience poorer outcomes for a range of health issues. Conditions that are unique to women, such as endometriosis and cervical cancer, are not well understood, treated or tested for. We also have the issue of gender recognition. Given the Supreme Court ruling and a clear update from the EHRC, the Scottish Government's failure to implement is, at the very best, a stalling tactic. Will the minister tell us, in her closing remarks, why public bodies are not complying with the law now?

Alex Cole-Hamilton: Sharon Dowey says that the EHRC has given clear guidance following the Supreme Court judgment. She must not have seen the select committee's evidence hearing with Baroness Kishwer Falkner of the EHRC, at which anything else was true—it was certainly not clear. Lord Sumption and Lady Hale have said that the possibility of misinterpreting the judgment by the EHRC is clear and redolent. What does Sharon Dowey have to say to those eminent former Supreme Court justices?

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

Sharon Dowey: I think that the EHRC ruling was quite clear, and I do not think that there is any way that we need to wait for the guidance to come out. I would like to know why public bodies are not implementing it now. If we are talking about a report from the National Advisory Council on Women and Girls, a good starting point is that we know what a woman is.

We still have men in women's prisons, and there is still a vacuum when it comes to guidance on how public servants, such as police officers, should deal with men pretending to be women, many of whom are twisted and dangerous.

We have talked a lot in the debate about the importance of equality and how vital it is that women and girls are supported, looked after and protected. I hope that, the next time that we come to the chamber to discuss this topic, we will have more positive evidence from those on the ground about the impact that all this debate is having.

15:54

Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP): I welcome the publication of the Government's first annual statement on gender policy coherence, which was

a recommendation from the First Minister's National Advisory Council on Women and Girls. I commend the members of the council and the members of the empowering women panel for sharing their expertise and vision to get us to this point.

Some of the most difficult challenges that have impacted us all in recent years, from the cost of living crisis to the pandemic, have had a disproportionate impact on certain groups in our communities, including women.

Women's poverty and child poverty are intrinsically linked, and women are more likely to use and work for public services, so getting our policies right for women—and for the most disadvantaged women—means better outcomes for everyone.

The SNP has a proud record of fighting for gender equality while in government, from action on equal pay and support for women returning to the workplace to action on period poverty and the introduction of "Equally Safe", which is the strategy to combat all forms of violence against women and girls. Policies such as the universal provision of 1,140 hours of high-quality early learning and childcare are critical to supporting women into work, supporting them to stay in work and keeping families out of poverty.

I particularly welcome the Scottish Government's commitment to intersectional gender budgeting to help us to improve our thinking about how spending and revenue raising impact men and women differently and whether we can use our budget processes to reduce gender inequality.

Recently, I was shocked when South Lanarkshire Council, in whose area my Rutherglen constituency is located, published an impact assessment on proposed changes to school transport that did not consider the different impacts that they would have on women. When families began to share their stories and their concerns, it became abundantly clear that women will be disproportionately adversely affected by the cuts that will—unfortunately—come into force in August. For example, many women in my constituency have told me of their concerns about how changes to transport arrangements for their children will affect their ability to work or to fit their work around their caring responsibilities. That will, of course, have potentially far-reaching consequences for everyone in their families.

The local councillors who noticed the omission of gender from the impact assessment and pressed officers for it to be included should be commended, but it should not have happened. That underlines the necessity and urgency of placing equality at the centre of our policies and

decision making and ensuring that it is taken into account in all actions in all spheres of government.

Gender equality is an unwon case both in Scotland and around the world. That statement does not minimise the positive changes or the progress that we have made as a Parliament and as a society, but it is a reminder that we must not be complacent. It is really important to acknowledge the First Minister's comments in the introduction to the annual statement:

"this feels like a very precarious time for equality ... It can feel like the political headwinds are trying to undermine the hard-won progress that has been made."

We must keep up the momentum.

In that context, I am pleased that the Scottish Government recognises that there is more work to be done to improve the collection, analysis and use of evidence on gender equality, and that it is committed to doing that and developing an equality strategy for women and girls. The strategy will be shaped by the voices of women and girls in a tangible way and it will provide a vehicle to accelerate the pace of progress and enable greater accountability.

Women in Scotland have faced inequality for generations, and it can feel as if change in the societal, cultural and institutional structures that maintain that inequality is slow. However, the work that is highlighted in the statement will move us closer to the change that we all want, and I welcome its publication.

15:58

Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): I am pleased to be able to speak in this debate. Like colleagues across the chamber, I welcome the publication of the annual statement, which finally delivers on the recommendation that Scottish ministers deliver an annual statement on gender policy coherence. As we have heard, that was first suggested by the National Advisory Council on Women and Girls in 2019. It has taken the time since then for the annual statement to be brought to fruition. I appreciate that we have had challenges in the intervening period—not least Covid—but we should reflect on the amount of time that it sometimes takes to prepare reports and then decide how we will implement the actions. Members across the chamber have reflected on the fact that having reports is all well and good but that taking action is really important.

Whatever the internal processes and challenges have been in collating the information that was needed to deliver an annual statement, there is now an opportunity for us all to take cognisance of it, reflect on it and decide how to move forward in relation to both the Government's actions and the actions that Parliament can take through scrutiny.

This debate will be important in that regard, but it is important that we come together annually to reflect on what progress is and is not being made.

There are similar opportunities in the parliamentary calendar to reflect on and debate issues that are relevant to supporting women and girls in Scottish society. Every year, we have many important opportunities for debate, such as on the annual 16 days of activism on gender-based violence. I have reflected, as have colleagues, that those debates cannot just take place at that time, or during those 16 days in the case of that example. We need year-round scrutiny and interrogation to ensure that we do not miss those important issues in the day-to-day work of the Parliament.

The point has been made already, but I agree that it is crucial that men—those who are in the chamber and other male colleagues in the Parliament—are involved in that scrutiny. It is always the case that too few men take part in these debates. I always try to say that it is very important that we reflect on our actions and behaviours. We must also reflect on how we are bringing up a new generation of boys and young men and informing their attitudes towards and understanding of women. We must reflect on whether we are giving them the right support to be the best men that they can be and to respect and understand what is acceptable behaviour towards women and girls. Many of those issues have already been explored very eloquently in the debate.

We need to take robust action to push back on toxic influences, toxic figures online and the drip-feeding of outdated and harmful views towards women, which has arguably set back our debates quite some way. We have to push harder to look at potential new ways to target those narratives, particularly online. I pay tribute to everyone, particularly the women in the chamber, who continue to work collaboratively to do that and to raise those issues and ensure that they do not disappear from our discourse.

I will reflect on the work that is being done in committees in the Parliament, which is very important. A lot of good, high-quality work can be done in committees, not least in the Equality, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee—some members of the committee are in the chamber for the debate—but also the Social Justice and Social Security Committee, which is concluding its report on the impact of finances on women who are leaving a domestically abusive relationship. Its forthcoming report will be important, because the evidence that we heard in the committee's inquiry was stark and concerning. A lot of tangible action could make a real difference in how we support women to leave a financially abusive relationship,

to get the right support and, fundamentally, to get on to the right footing and have the right financial support to move on with their lives.

There is a huge amount of work for us all to do, but I am particularly cognisant of the role that men play in understanding the issues, moving forward and supporting the women in the chamber and beyond in Scotland so that we can all move forward together for equality.

16:03

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): I am proud to speak in support of the Scottish Government's motion and to welcome the publication of the first annual statement on gender policy coherence. It is a long overdue step that will start to hold us accountable to the promises that we have made to women and girls in Scotland.

The National Advisory Council on Women and Girls has given us clear direction, and its recommendations are rooted in real-world experience. We need to improve our public sector equality duty, gather better intersectional data, tackle workplace inequality, shift public attitudes and critically embed intersectional gender budgeting into our approach as a Government.

I will focus my remarks on gender budgeting, because how we spend money is how we demonstrate our priorities. Let us be honest: in Scotland, as in many other countries, we have benefited off the backs of women's unpaid care for generations. It is mostly women who have raised the kids, cared for elderly parents, supported disabled family members, run the school fundraisers, managed the house and kept things afloat in a crisis. What have they mostly got in return? Pension gaps; poverty; burnout; and, oftentimes, stigma, especially if they are doing it alone. Such irony.

Instead of valuing unpaid care as the essential work that it is, we have often treated it as a personal lifestyle choice—something to be quietly admired, maybe, but not something to properly fund or support. In far too many cases, doing that role has even been used against women, who are told that they did not work hard enough, did not contribute enough and did not earn enough to deserve financial security in later life. That really has to change, and the way to do that is to build that recognition directly into our systems, which is what gender budgeting is all about. That is why the National Advisory Council on Women and Girls is right to keep pushing for it.

I thank the Scottish Women's Budget Group for its briefing and for its brilliant long-term work on the topic. It has shown us clearly how budgets are not neutral but political, and that, if we do not apply a gender lens, we will end up with the same

old story of services designed for a world that does not exist, where women are expected to pick up the slack. We need to turn that on its head.

Women still carry the weight of unpaid care and underpaid care in this country. They take time out of work to raise children, and they often reduce hours to support relatives, meaning that many retire without enough contributions for a full pension, yet they are the ones who have held together families, communities and even whole sectors such as health and social care. Although they are doing all that, they are still made to feel as though they should be doing more, doing it with less or doing it more quietly.

We should not be interested in quiet gratitude. I am interested in structural change. I want a Scotland that builds fairness into its foundations, and that starts with how we raise and spend our money.

The Scottish Government has made great progress on free childcare, the Scottish child payment and many more initiatives, such as the carers allowance supplement and, of course, the lifting of the two-child benefit cap. Those policies are great examples of what happens when we centre fairness and compassion in our budgets. They are lifting families out of poverty and recognising the value of care.

Gender budgeting should not be optional; it should be law. We should not still be seeing local authorities pass budgets without proper equality impact assessments. We cannot keep saying that we care about fairness while we are still making decisions that disadvantage the very people who do the caring.

This is not just a women's issue; it concerns children, disabled people, low-income families and future generations. When we budget for women, we are budgeting for a fairer, more equal Scotland for everyone. Women have done the heavy lifting for far too long. It is time that we lifted the burden from them and shared the power. I look forward to seeing the progress that has been made when we gather to debate the issue again next year.

16:07

Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this important debate on progressing the recommendations on equality that have been made by the National Advisory Council on Women and Girls.

The National Advisory Council on Women and Girls was formed as a catalyst for change and as an organisation that could address gender inequality and provide independent strategic advice to the First Minister and the wider Scottish

Government. Since it was formed in 2017, it has made a series of recommendations to tackle gender inequality across Scotland, with a particular focus on creating the leadership, culture and systems that are required to enable women and girls to be better prioritised and responded to in the right ways.

Much has been said in the debate already about the progress that has been made in multiple areas, including social security, pay and equality—whether financial or in terms of opportunity. I absolutely celebrate all that and welcome the Government's statements on the progress that it wants to continue to make and that Parliament wants to be made. Hard-won progress has been achieved, and we rightly recognise that today, as well as reflecting on what more needs to be done.

One of the priorities in the advisory council's recommendations is the issue of attitudinal shifts. Other speakers have talked about that already, and I will focus the remainder of my remarks in that space.

The Scottish Government is exercising leadership to challenge the underpinning issues that affect the safety of women and girls in our society, which, as has been emphasised already, involve the behaviour of men and boys. We have made much progress, but there is more to do—that is absolutely certain.

Let me be clear: if they had this opportunity, most men and boys would speak as passionately as me about the need for greater equality and in support of women and girls. Of course, there are still social attitudes and behaviours that are counterproductive and negative and which cause great harm to women and girls in our society, so we must continue to challenge that behaviour in men and boys, and we must do so proactively, passionately and strategically.

We have made real progress, but we are also at a very fragile time, particularly when it comes to boys. Some of the influences around them in modern Scotland try to lead our society towards regression. Online influences—some influencers are well known—can be very harmful and are very worrying.

All of that feeds into the greater challenge presented by a number of younger people in our society. They might have situations around them that have made their lives challenging, but they are engaging in some really challenging behaviour, whether that is violence or theft. The youth summit update that we received earlier today in Parliament was really helpful, because this is all connected, including the issue of violence in schools. I am glad of and support the elevated steps that we have seen and would expect from central Government to deal with the

issue of the very small but growing minority of young men who are engaging in extremely challenging and worrying behaviour, including in my constituency. Their behaviour, which could impact other young men around them, includes the spreading of harmful messages about and attitudes to women and girls, and has the potential to have a really damaging effect on our communities, not just in the short to medium term, but beyond that, into the years and decades ahead.

An urgent and strong response on how we support men and boys to make better choices, and how we deal with those who are making bad choices, is really important, because we do not want to go backwards. We have enough work to do as things are, so let us continue to make progress and think together, between now and the 16 days of activism in November, about what more we can do, as MSPs in our communities and with other stakeholders in our country, to challenge the bad attitudes of a minority of men and boys, and to change those social attitudes in our communities and in our society.

It is good to be working with colleagues on this issue. I am proud to support the advisory council in its work and the Government in progressing that. I hope that, when we come back from the recess, we can think about what more we can do. I look forward to supporting the Government in its endeavours.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to closing speeches.

16:13

Maggie Chapman: I am pleased to close the debate on behalf of the Scottish Greens.

We have heard many thoughtful reflections from members about aspects of the council's work—its recommendations, its achievements and, of course, the regrettable gaps and shortfalls.

In her foreword to the report, Shirley-Anne Somerville acknowledged that

“the pace of change can feel frustratingly slow.”

I think that many members share that frustration. Although it is, of course, important to move forward with care and consultation, sometimes the sense of urgency seems to be lost in successive changes or stages that never quite reach their objective. The first example in the report of the proposed “What Works?” institute illustrates that tendency.

We recognise the limits that are imposed by the devolution settlement—there are yet more examples of why we need the full powers of a normal country. In the meantime, important and

imaginative work has been done. For example, although we are barred from legislating for quotas, the funding of Elect Her and the Engender equal representation project, alongside support for the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, has opened up the potential for political representation by and for many more women and non-binary people in Scotland.

Like Rona Mackay, I am glad to be part of the gender-sensitive Parliament advisory group, which is looking for further opportunities to improve the diversity of representation that we have in our politics.

Of course, gaps remain, some of which are wide and gaping. The difference between the funded childcare that is currently offered to families and that which was recommended by the council is immense. If women could access the level of funded childcare that was recommended—50 hours a week for children from six months of age—their opportunities for earning, career progression and family wellbeing would be utterly transformed. The impact that that would have on our poverty levels cannot be overstated.

We have heard about the devastating impact on the lives of not only women but their families and wider communities of unequal or absent access to, and misogyny in, our healthcare, justice, education and other public service systems, on which we should all be able to rely. However, it has been heartening to hear the clear majority call for recognition that gender policy coherence will not work without intersectionality. We must be better at understanding the multiple overlapping and interconnected identities and factors that affect whether women and girls are able to survive and thrive.

In his foreword to the report, the First Minister wrote about the “political headwinds” that threaten our progress on gender equality. He is absolutely right, as Clare Haughey highlighted. We are in a very different context from the one in which Nicola Sturgeon founded the initiative, but that is no reason to give up, to lose hope or to diminish the scale or the radicalism of our ambition.

We face wars and preparation for more war; brutal cuts to the livelihoods of the poorest; a situation in which priority is given to economic growth at all costs, with no care for distribution; the rhetoric and reality of punitive immigration controls; the normalisation of killing thousands of children by swift or slow violence; the myth that climate change is controllable through technology alone; and the replacement of male accountability with misogyny and transphobia. However, we know how to counter all those things and how to live, speak and act with integrity, intelligence, solidarity and compassion.

Scotland has been a leader in human rights, and it can be again. It is still bitterly disappointing that we have not had, in this session, the groundbreaking legislation that we were promised, but we in the Scottish Greens, at least, will not rest until that has been achieved. Thanks to people such as Emma Ritch, the groundwork has been done, and it will be tragic if we do not continue to build on that groundwork with renewed energies. The women and girls of Scotland need us to do just that.

16:17

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): As members have highlighted, there are still too many barriers for women and girls in society, so when progress is made, it is important to celebrate that. Progress is not inevitable. It takes bravery, and it requires us to persuade people who disagree with us and to take them with us. That is the definition of leadership.

Progress has been made, much of which has been outlined by members today, but I would like to comment on some further progress. This week, the UK Labour Government made progress by righting a long-standing wrong that women have experienced, by decriminalising abortion and enabling women to have control over their own bodies.

The UK Labour Government’s Employment Rights Bill also adds protections that will support women in the workplace, by expanding the preventative duty on employers to take all reasonable steps to prevent sexual harassment and increasing the burden of justification on employers to accept flexible working requests. The UK Labour Government has also committed to making the right to parental and paternal leave a day 1 right.

While we celebrate success, we must accept that there is still much to do, as many members, including Maggie Chapman, Ben Macpherson, Sharon Dowey and Clare Haughey, have acknowledged this afternoon. Gender inequality harms everyone, not just women and girls, and ending it should be a national priority.

Addressing the remaining gaps in gender equality will take more than strategies and publications. It will require reform of public services and actions to shift systemic inequalities, as my colleague Paul O’Kane pointed out. It is important to consider the particular impacts on women and girls who face additional challenges as a result of the barriers that society places in front of them, as other members have noted, because of how their gender interacts with their race, religion, sexuality, disability or a combination of all of those.

On various measures, there is a lot of work yet to do. As Tess White noted, women still earn less than men. Then there is public transport, which, the report notes, women rely on more than men do. The slow pace on the regulation of buses has negative impacts on women, because it allows decisions to be made that disproportionately affect them, such as the decision this week by First Bus to cut the service 65 in Glasgow. The concerns of taxi drivers in Glasgow have not been addressed, which means that hundreds of them are leaving the job, leaving women with less access to a safe route home.

The plan also mentions women's health, but, as has been acknowledged, women still experience health inequality. That includes disabled women in Glasgow who have difficulties accessing cervical smear tests—in some cases, with deadly consequences. I thank members, including the cabinet secretary and Rona Mackay, for acknowledging that that is unacceptable.

The report also notes that women are more likely to be in temporary accommodation and to need social housing. This week, Glasgow Women's Aid told me that, in 2009, the average length of time that a woman leaving abuse spent in temporary accommodation was about 90 days, but that some women are there now for more than two years. The fear of ending up in temporary accommodation if they leave the home that they share with the perpetrator of violence against them is preventing women in Glasgow from leaving abusive partners. We must address that if we are to address women's inequality.

Despite the fact that there is a gender equality task force in education and learning, girls are still less likely to study science, technology, engineering and mathematics subjects than boys are. Women teachers and support staff report a rise in misogynistic behaviour, and there is violence against them in schools, as my colleague Katy Clark highlighted. One newly qualified primary school teacher detailed this week how she has bruises up and down her arms. Although some of the guidance that was published this week is useful when it comes to consequences, it does not tackle the root causes of the violence that many women and girls experience in schools.

There are real-life consequences to all policy decisions. For key public services, task forces and strategies are important aspects, but we need to take a different approach to shift the dial on women's equality.

I think that we in Parliament, across all parties, have a responsibility to rise to that challenge. I am grateful for the tone of this debate—most of it—and the collegiate approach that has been taken. We have a responsibility to make politics a better

place for women, so that we can join in the solutions that are found in this place.

I will close on the issue of rising abuse in public life. Women MSPs face more misogynistic abuse in their public role now than they did when the Parliament first opened. Councillors and MPs are also affected, and so are women who seek office. One of my male colleagues remarked that their eyes were opened to the levels of abuse that women face on social media when I tagged them in a post. I know that staff on my team would rather that I did not have access to my account at all, to save me seeing some of the vile ableist and misogynist comments. Every woman in this place and in public life will be able to recognise that.

None of us should have to experience that. Those who sit in this chamber must reflect society, but if that is to happen, we have to make politics a better, safer and more comfortable place for women to be. Although the Government must go further—as we would all say—and show practical political leadership, we also have to tackle head-on the many issues that women and girls face every day and resolve to ensure that, by our collective endeavours, in Parliament and beyond, Scotland can become the welcoming and inclusive country that we all want and know that it can be.

16:23

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con):

On a point of consensus with Pam Duncan-Glancy, I am sure that my team also wishes that I did not have access to my social media accounts, because I see the abuse that I receive daily, and I have also seen the abuse that many other female MSPs receive daily. However, what we probably need to start doing is collectively calling it out, as that might make the Parliament a far better place than it is now.

I welcome the publication of the first annual statement on gender policy coherence in response to the National Advisory Council on Women and Girls. Members have spoken about healthcare, justice, childcare and the equality strategy. I want to dip into each of those topics in the time that I have.

I will start with healthcare, because there are a lot of areas of consensus, particularly in relation to plans around endometriosis and menopause. Any woman who has concerns regarding those issues should be able to be seen—and straight away. It is important that women have access to healthcare for those conditions as soon as possible.

Pam Duncan-Glancy raised an important issue about smear tests for disabled women. Too many of us take for granted being able to go for a smear test. As awkward as that is, disabled women have to add how they might feel about having to check

with a GP to see whether they have the accessibility for them to come in and get their smear. That is on top of the worry and stress that naturally come with getting a smear test, which we have all felt at some point in our lives. If the Scottish Government can address that through conversations with GPs, that would be the right way forward to allow more women who have disabilities to access a smear test whenever they are called to receive one.

On the exchange that I had with Alex Cole-Hamilton about cervical cancer, that issue needs to be picked up by the Scottish Government. Children from the poorest areas are less likely to get an anti-cancer jab than those from affluent communities. Public Health Scotland has warned about the uptake in Scotland's most deprived communities, which is 20 per cent lower than in more affluent areas. The Government needs to address that in the women's health plan to ensure that, as well as addressing concerns for older women, we address concerns for younger women, get them on the right pathway and ensure that they are vaccinated.

Earlier, I said "PVG vaccine" instead of "HPV vaccine", so I apologise for that.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I agree with Meghan Gallacher on the important issue that she raised. I hope that I can reassure her that work has been undertaken to identify the barriers to that and to deal with them. We have the screening inequalities fund to look at those issues. There is also the work that has been done by the cervical cancer elimination group to look at exactly what the challenges are and why they exist. If we get that right, there is an immense opportunity for women and the public purse. We therefore need to ensure that we tackle those barriers. I thank Meghan Gallacher for raising that issue today.

Meghan Gallacher: Anything that can be done to try to increase the uptake is more than welcome, and I am sure that it would receive cross-party support. It is about protecting young women and girls from being diagnosed with cervical cancer later in life. No one wants that.

We heard from Alex Cole-Hamilton about transvaginal mesh issues, which have been raised many a time in the Parliament. Many MSPs in the chamber feel passionately about that issue and have driven it forward to get results. However, we have to keep driving it. We cannot stop now, because we need to ensure that anyone who has been impacted by the issue receives the support that they deserve because of what has happened to them.

Moving on to childcare-related issues—

Paul O'Kane: Before Meghan Gallacher moves on to talk about childcare, can she say whether

she recognises the importance of neonatal services for women and, in particular, the issues that we have debated on the Government's downgrading of the neonatal service at University hospital Wishaw, which is of serious concern to a number of Lanarkshire members in the chamber, not least my colleague Davy Russell, the member for Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse? Does she recognise the importance of that to women?

Meghan Gallacher: I had a members' business debate on that exact issue. Wishaw is in my region and I believe passionately that women should have access to neonatal services as close to home as possible. I will always stand up for Lanarkshire mums who want to go to Wishaw to receive that service if they and their babies need it.

I will move on to childcare. I have already gone off on a tangent, as per my usual approach. Childcare was mentioned by a number of MSPs. We have 30 hours of free or funded childcare. The cabinet secretary said that that was the most generous offering in the United Kingdom, but the Scottish Government also promised to roll that out for children who are nine months and older, yet we have not seen any progress on that. It is incumbent on the Government to update Parliament on whether that is still its ambition or whether it is no longer its ambition to have free or funded childcare from nine months onwards. We are talking about getting our economy moving and getting women back into work if they want to do so, so that would be widely welcomed and, I am sure, supported by parties across the chamber.

Justice issues have been raised throughout the debate, but I will not have time to go through all of them. I will move to the equality strategy, about which members raised a lot of issues. We have issues in relation to widening pay gaps, and the misogyny bill has been dropped, which is yet another Scottish Government promise that has not been maintained in this parliamentary session. Some people will feel desperately let down that that bill is not coming to the Scottish Parliament in this session. Sharon Dowey was right that there is a lot of talk but not so much action on inequality issues. That is where improvements need to be made.

Paul O'Kane, Ben Macpherson and others talked about the attitudes of boys and young men and how we can improve outcomes for women by tackling issues such as violence against women and girls.

I will finish on a point that Tess White raised about sex and gender, which is important because we are talking about women and girls and sex-based rights. My point relates to the Supreme Court ruling on single-sex spaces. Last night, the

Scottish Government issued a response, which said:

“The Scottish Government has been clear that we accept the Supreme Court judgment. We are reviewing policies, guidance and legislation potentially impacted by the judgment.”

It went on to say:

“The Scottish Government’s approach is aligned with that of the UK Government and Welsh Government in awaiting the EHRC’s revised statutory code of practice.”

I must say that that is a rather peculiar statement. In a meeting this morning, which my colleague Tess White mentioned, the EHRC was crystal clear that the Scottish Government can get on with it and that it should comply with the law now. We need to find out today why the Government is, in my view, unnecessarily delaying the implementation of the Supreme Court ruling.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: Will the member give way?

Meghan Gallacher: I am not entirely sure whether I have time.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): There is a lot of time in hand.

Meghan Gallacher: I have time, so I will.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: We have an example of the Conservatives saying that the EHRC guidance is crystal clear, but anyone who watched the testimony that Kishwer Falkner gave to the Women and Equalities Committee last week would say that it is anything but clear. At the end of the day, her commission has suggested that all public toilets that are owned by public bodies should be assigned on the basis of gender at birth, yet also suggested that the policing of that guidance would be absolutely absurd, as it would require people to ask for birth certificates on presentation at those toilets. Does Meghan Gallacher realise that there is still a live debate on that topic and that we should not implement the guidance until that debate is concluded?

Meghan Gallacher: I am not entirely sure that Alex Cole-Hamilton listened to what I said. The call, which came directly from the EHRC, took place this morning; MSPs were present and listened to what the EHRC said. The commission was clear that public bodies can get on with implementing the Supreme Court ruling, so why the delay? Why are we not getting on with that now?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Will the member take an intervention?

Alex Cole-Hamilton: On that point—

Meghan Gallacher: I have been really generous with interventions during my contribution. However, I recommend that Alex

Cole-Hamilton meets the EHRC, because that point might be made clearer for him.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: But—

Meghan Gallacher: I will get on with what I was going to say, because I am well over time and have taken a lot of interventions on the issue.

It is important for the Government to clarify why we are still stalling. It is clear that we can get on with matters now. With that, Presiding Officer, I close my remarks.

The Presiding Officer: I call the minister to wind up the debate.

16:33

The Minister for Equalities (Kaukab Stewart): I thank members across the chamber for their contributions and add my thanks to past and present members of the National Advisory Council on Women and Girls and to the empowering women panel, who have made today’s debate possible. As the cabinet secretary has said, the panel is a diverse group of women and girls whom I had the opportunity to meet earlier this year, and they have been brought together by the council so that their lived experience can inform its work. That is important, because some women experience multiple forms of discrimination and inequality—for example, because they are disabled or are from a minority ethnic background.

Some of the advisory council’s recommendations are aimed at ensuring that the voices of the most marginalised women and girls shape our policies across Government. The council has asked us to put lived experience at the heart of policy making and to ensure that we are collecting robust intersectional data. In the next few minutes, I would like to tell members how we are delivering on those asks, and I will try to respond to as many of the points that were raised as I possibly can.

At the end of April, the Scottish Government published new equality outcomes for the period to 2029.

Tess White: Will the minister take an intervention?

Kaukab Stewart: I will make some progress and then come back to address members’ points.

Under the Equality Act 2010, we are required to set those outcomes every four years. They are intended to enable us to better fulfil the public sector equality duty, which is part of the act. We have chosen to focus on two of our three outcomes—strengthening the collection, analysis and publication of equality evidence, and embedding lived experience and participation at the heart of our work—to reflect our commitment

to ensuring that the voices of women and girls, who are most affected by inequality, shape our policies and decisions. We will deliver a range of actions in the period to 2029 to achieve those outcomes, and we will create resources to support Scottish Government staff in delivering participation and lived experience approaches and look at ways of making it easier for communities to engage with us and share their experiences.

In relation to intersectional data and evidence, we are building on a well-established programme of work that includes the 2023 publication entitled "Scotland's Equality Evidence Strategy 2023-2025". Our strategy sets out actions to improve the equality evidence base across most policy areas. We know that good-quality data helps us better understand women's experiences and the barriers that they might encounter, and it helps us deliver better and more informed policy and know when additional targeted measures are needed.

We can also point to where lived experience approaches are making a difference right now across Government. For example, our funding of the sexual assault co-ordination services, which the cabinet secretary mentioned, includes funding for a patient advocate to help ensure that women's lived experience is reflected in policy development. The empowering women panel has also been working directly with Government civil servants on the design of our school-age childcare programme.

I would like to address some of the points that were raised about using the terms "sex" and "gender" as if they were interchangeable. I will make an attempt to explain my view on that. Sex is the protected characteristic and we accept the Supreme Court's ruling—there is no ambiguity about that. Gender signifies the stereotypes and the systemic, institutional and societal barriers that are gendered, such as those on, say, pay gap reporting. Both terms co-exist and inform each other. That is the theme that comes through the NACWG report and our response as a Government.

I would also like to address the point about non-fatal strangulation. We are aware and understand why Fiona Drouet submitted her petition on the issue, and we recognise the significant physical and psychological impact that that type of criminality has on victims. The Scottish Government has committed to undertaking a comprehensive assessment of the law to see whether further action needs to be taken. We will also look at the Criminal Justice Committee's evidence session on 21 May as part of that wider consideration.

Rona Mackay, Karen Adam and many others talked about gender budgeting. To give members reassurance, I would point out that we are

changing how we think about our spending decisions—

Tess White: Will the minister give way on that point?

Kaukab Stewart: I will just finish my sentence, which was about the spending decisions that can help women and girls through gender budgeting, including further pilot activity on gender budget tagging for the 2026-27 budget, which builds on our work with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

Tess White: The national performance framework is set by the Scottish Government as the wellbeing framework for the whole of Scotland, but concerns have been raised at committee level that there is not a single outcome on gender equality. Does the minister have a view on that?

Kaukab Stewart: Tess White is perhaps referring to the use of equality impact assessments, which will ensure that that work is progressed. Following evidence sessions that I have had at the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee, of which she is a member, on the work that I am pursuing, I think that she will agree that we must ensure that we raise the standard across the whole of Scotland, so that we can address the point that she raises and which I thank her for making.

I will add something further on gender budgeting. On 26 February 2025, the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice committed to developing a national gender strategy co-designed with the NACWG, the empowering women panel—EWP—and wider groups of women with diverse lived experience. I hope that that will give members some reassurance on gender budgeting and the fact that we take it very seriously.

Ms White talked about the gender pay gap. Although the median gender pay gap for full-time employees in Scotland increased from 1.4 per cent in 2023 to 2.2 per cent in 2024, the gap continues to be narrower than the UK equivalent, which is sitting at 7 per cent at the moment. I thought that it was worth while mentioning that.

I welcome the speeches that have been made on the issue of unpaid carers. Karen Adam illustrated the issue very well. It is recognised that around 73 per cent of unpaid carers are women, and I would highlight the fact that the Government is investing £522 million in 2025-26 to deliver three benefits to support unpaid carers.

The debate marks the publication of the Scottish Government's first annual statement on gender policy coherence, which describes the significant range of activity that is going on across the Government to make the lives of women and girls in Scotland better. It sets a benchmark against

which we can measure progress in the years to come.

The former UN secretary general Kofi Annan said:

“Gender equality is more than a goal in itself. It is a precondition for meeting the challenge of reducing poverty, promoting sustainable development and building good governance.”

In that respect, we all have a stake in the realisation of greater equality for women and girls in Scotland.

Alexander Dennis Ltd

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

We move to the next item of business, which is a statement by Kate Forbes on Alexander Dennis Ltd. The Deputy First Minister will take questions at the end of her statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

16:44

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Gaelic (Kate Forbes):

This statement concerns the announcement that was made last week by Alexander Dennis Ltd—ADL—regarding a new strategy for its United Kingdom manufacturing operations. I want to be as open as possible in the statement and in subsequent follow-up conversations with members.

I recognise that it is a hugely worrying time for the workforce at ADL, their families and the wider community in Falkirk and Larbert. I have shared with the unions that represent that workforce my commitment to leaving no stone unturned to secure a future for the company and the workforce. The company is a significant employer and supports a highly valuable supply chain. Our focus right now is on supporting the business as well as the communities around that business.

In recent weeks, the First Minister and I, in many cases with the support of the Cabinet Secretary for Transport, have engaged extensively with Alexander Dennis and its parent company, NFI Group, to understand the issues and express our commitment to exploring every possible avenue.

We first spoke with ADL about the specific proposals on 25 May, and I believe that the company informed the UK Government at the same time. Directors of Alexander Dennis were open about the challenges posed by international competition. They also spoke of the strength of potential demand over the coming years as bus operators across the UK pivot towards net zero.

In response to market dynamics, ADL is proposing to consolidate its UK bus manufacturing operations into a single site. The company believes that consolidation will ensure

“financial sustainability and lower operating costs in the face of changing and challenging market dynamics.”

Under current proposals, manufacturing in Falkirk would be discontinued and the site closed, while production at Larbert would be suspended on the completion of current contracts.

The statutory consultation therefore places up to 400 roles at potential risk of redundancy—nearly one quarter of ADL’s entire workforce. We are

determined to help the business find an alternative to that route and to find different ways to meet market challenges through investment and improved performance.

A key part of that is the ability of ADL to secure future orders. That is why we are working closely with the company to identify and secure a forward pipeline of demand for high-quality buses from Scottish and UK customers. Confidence in the demand pipeline is critical in both the short and longer term, and we recognise that a clear future pipeline of orders is the key to securing the future of bus manufacturing in Scotland.

Although the Scottish Government is exploring all possible opportunities to ensure a healthy pipeline in Scotland, it is clear that the bus market in the rest of the United Kingdom is substantially larger. Since 2020, Alexander Dennis has secured orders for 361 zero-emission buses, more than any other single manufacturer, through Transport Scotland's Scottish zero-emission bus challenge fund and its predecessor, the Scottish ultra-low-emission bus scheme. Under those programmes, ADL has received £58 million of Scottish Government subsidy for vehicles.

ADL and bus production are synonymous, with more than a century of manufacturing excellence and innovation growing from Walter Alexander's original coach works in Falkirk. I am sure that, across the chamber, we all respect that proud history and recognise the continuing significance of the company in the local economy.

However, this is not only a local issue. ADL draws on, and is supported by, a much larger and wider supply chain. In the past five years, Alexander Dennis has spent more than £1 billion with its 1,000 suppliers in all parts of the United Kingdom. The company's own analysis suggests that

"For every job in bus manufacturing, there is a multiplier of three to four jobs in the wider supply chain and support services."

A just transition requires that we retain the capacity to build low and zero-emission buses as a key part of the transition to a low carbon economy, to retain good, green jobs and skills. Buses connect communities all across Scotland, and travelling by bus is already one of the greenest transport choices that people can make. Transforming our bus networks from older diesel to zero emissions not only contributes to our emissions reduction targets but improves air quality and reduces harmful noise pollution.

Our policy interventions to date have been designed to accelerate uptake of zero-emission buses in the Scottish market. With our investment of more than £150 million, Scotland now has a higher proportion of zero-emission buses than any

other part of the United Kingdom outside London. In 2024, 14 per cent of all buses in Scotland had zero emissions, compared with only 7.4 per cent in England.

In addition to supporting operators to embrace zero-emission buses, we have also invested directly with Alexander Dennis. Scottish Enterprise has a strong 10-year-plus strategic partnership with Alexander Dennis and has supported the company with technology development, skills and cultural transformation over many years. I think that it was clear from the letter from Alexander Dennis just how much it values that on-going support.

Over the past 10 years, Scottish Enterprise has awarded £30.5 million in research and development support to ADL, as a contribution towards £120 million of R and D spend by the company. Those grants have supported the development of ultra-low-emission and zero-emission technologies at ADL. Scottish Enterprise and Transport Scotland continue to provide ongoing support to the company, both directly and through support for the adoption of zero-emission buses.

I turn now to the Government's response to ADL's consultation. We will work in close collaboration with the company, the trade unions and the UK Government to find practical solutions. We will not play politics with this situation, and we will continue to explore every avenue to avoid job losses.

I spoke with the Secretary of State for Scotland on 4 June, and we agreed to establish a cross-governmental working group to discuss options to stimulate demand and avert job losses. The second meeting of that working group was held on Monday this week, and the group will meet again at the beginning of next week.

We recognise ADL's historic leadership in championing the cause, including through its co-chairing of the industry advisory group on the automotive sector and the subsequent Scottish bus decarbonisation task force, which published its pathway to net zero in 2022. The pathway describes a shared approach between Government, operators, manufacturers and the finance and energy sectors to creating a net zero future for buses. The leadership of bus operators such as First, Stagecoach and Lothian Buses in committing to go to net zero by 2035 is to be commended. That represents a wholesale change in how the bus sector operates, creating challenges but also new opportunities.

I recognise that ADL cannot stand still, and we want to support the company to innovate and bring forward new products that reflect changes in the sector. In this Government, we will continue to do

all in our power to support Alexander Dennis and its highly skilled workers.

Following the announcement, I updated local elected members. I spoke with Michael Matheson, who is a long-standing advocate for the company, and also to Brian Leishman MP, whose constructive approach I am grateful for.

On Monday and again yesterday, I spoke with the trade unions that represent ADL workers in Scotland—GMB and Unite the Union—in separate meetings. They impressed on me the positive engagement that they were having with ADL, and they emphasised the importance of having a pipeline of orders for Falkirk and Larbert as part of any solution. That is precisely why that is a solution that we are working through.

I welcome the constructive approach of Unite the Union and GMB Scotland, and we share an absolute commitment to do all that we can to save those jobs. I will continue that dialogue every few days over the coming weeks.

It is important that we in the chamber put aside politics and work together during the 45-day consultation period in order to find practical solutions, hopefully well in advance of the end of that consultation period, to support the business and safeguard production of zero-emission buses in Falkirk and Larbert. We will need to collaborate across the chamber, with the UK Government and with procuring authorities to achieve success. That is where I think that there is an opportunity to find a solution.

Members of the Parliament, particularly those who have constituency interests, will want to be kept up to date, so I undertake to update members as frequently as they wish.

As we move to questions, I recognise that members have a tendency to pose multiple questions in their speaking slot, not all of which I might recall in my efforts to answer them. I would be happy to take an opportunity after the statement to go into more detail on the solutions that we are looking at and how we can collaborate to put them into practice.

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

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): I thank the Deputy First Minister for advance sight of her statement.

My heartfelt thoughts—and, I am sure, those of every other member—are with the workers and families who have been impacted by this terrible move. I hear what the Deputy First Minister says about setting politics aside, but our role here is to

scrutinise the performance of the Scottish Government.

This crisis did not come out of the blue. However skilfully it was delivered, the statement cannot conceal the truth. The Scottish National Party Government was warned repeatedly for more than a year and did nothing. When ADL asked for support, it was met with silence. When Scottish jobs were on the line, the Scottish Government was looking in another direction. When orders for buses were needed, those orders went to China. This was not a matter of subsidy control; it was strategic neglect. Ministers now want to hide behind technicalities that a farthing's worth of creativity and an ounce of leadership could have overcome—£90 million of public money went to ADL, but there was not even a guarantee of jobs. This is not just about industrial failure; it is a betrayal of Scottish manufacturing and, after everything that has happened in that area of Scotland, it is a betrayal of the Forth valley workforce.

I will ask this question again, plainly. Why, under the SNP Government, was public money spent not in a factory employing skilled Scottish workers in Falkirk but in a factory thousands of miles away in China?

Kate Forbes: Stephen Kerr might not want to believe what I have said, but perhaps he will believe what the company said in its letter. It was very clear about how much it valued Scottish Government support over the past few years. I will provide the statistics in a moment. It also cited a competitive imbalance in the UK market as part of the reason for the decision.

Here are some figures. Since 2020, ADL has secured orders for more than 360 vehicles through Scottish Government funding programmes. I imagine that my Labour colleagues might talk about Manchester, so let us compare that with how many vehicles were ordered via Manchester—the number was 160. ADL got all the demand for double-decker buses resulting from the Scottish zero-emission bus challenge fund.

On procurement, we have supported Alexander Dennis within the legal structures in which we have to operate. ADL has been clear that the challenge across the UK is to do with a competitive imbalance. Public bodies must comply with procurement regulations, the Subsidy Control Act 2022 and other relevant legislation.

Stephen Kerr said that we have offered no support in the past year—I am happy to be corrected if that is inaccurate. Since 2020, ADL has received £58 million of funding for zero-emission buses, and Scottish Enterprise has supported Alexander Dennis with £30.5 million in

research and development support. That is the investment that we have made.

We understand that, if we are going to find a route forward to support the workforce, which I intend to do, we have to be realistic about what the challenges are. I have set out in my statement that the route to providing support involves looking at ADL's cost base, considering what additional support we can provide to help with productivity and to lower costs, and ensuring that there is demand. That is why we are working with the procuring authorities, not just in Scotland but further afield, to look at whether we can develop an order book for ADL.

It is completely untrue to suggest that the Scottish Government has not acted over the past few years to support local manufacturing. The correspondence with ADL refers to that competitive imbalance, which we have to confront, recognise the root causes of and work through.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): I thank the Deputy First Minister for advance sight of her statement.

As a matter of record, last year, under those contracts, there were 252 bus awards, but only 44 went to Alexander Dennis. The figures that the Deputy First Minister quoted for Manchester are since 2022, whereas the figures that she quoted for Scotland are since 2020.

A cross-party group of MSPs met workers from Alexander Dennis. Two things are very clear from that meeting. First, the urgency of the matter is clear—if there is no action within weeks, jobs will be lost by August—and, secondly, we need orders on the book.

Will the Scottish Government undertake an urgent review of the Subsidy Control Act 2022? Based on advice from the Cabinet Office, I understand that variation can be made through a direct award in relation to social value and by disregarding non-treaty state suppliers such as China. The Scottish Government might want to consult mayoralities that have used those aspects.

What assessment has been made on overreliance on a single country of manufacture for bus supply, given that buses are critical transport infrastructure? What steps will be taken to use the Scottish Government's convening power to convene bus operators, both private and public, in order to bring forward orders and facilitate the order book that the 400 Alexander Dennis workers so badly need?

Kate Forbes: Another helpful clarification, I hope, for Daniel Johnson is that ADL secured orders for 72 of the 252 vehicles in ScotZEB 2. A number of those were not able to be delivered by the company, so the final order for ADL involved

fewer vehicles, but it is important that the record reflects the truth in relation to securing orders.

I am quite astonished that Daniel Johnson asked me to review the Subsidy Control Act 2022, which is a reserved matter. We are looking at how we can support domestic manufacturing, and we have been engaging with the UK Government on that. He will know that procurement rules are broadly aligned across Scotland and the UK at large. All awards of public contracts must comply with the provisions in procurement legislation.

To directly answer Daniel Johnson, we are looking at all options. I appeal to members to consider what the company specifically cites as its primary challenges, so that, instead of going off to try to fix things that politicians have come up with, we try to fix the issues that the company has identified as needing to be fixed.

Michael Matheson (Falkirk West) (SNP): Over the course of last week, I had an opportunity to engage with the unions, and I visited the factory to speak to workers on Monday. It is clear from all the discussions in which I have participated that they see a way through the short and medium-term challenges that the company faces, but the only way in which that will be achieved is if the Scottish and UK Governments work together to find it.

I therefore ask the Deputy First Minister two specific questions. First, will she set out what measures the Scottish Government is looking at taking forward to address the short-term challenge that the company has with a lack of orders? Secondly, what action is being taken to address the fundamental challenge that the company faces with the uneven playing field whereby the Chinese bus sector will go from having a 10 per cent share of the UK market at the end of last year to a 35 per cent share this year? How will we deal with that challenge under the Subsidy Control Act 2022, and what measures is the UK Government saying that it will consider to address the uneven playing field that the company faces?

Kate Forbes: Michael Matheson is right to say that there is cause for hope in terms of finding a way through the present challenges. I hope that the gist of my statement was that I think that there are solutions there, but those can be delivered only through collaboration, which is why I emphasised the point about needing to work with people and not to resort to politics.

On the short-term measures, one of the challenges is that, even if we are able to identify demand, there might be a short lead time before that demand can come to fruition.

The member will know that we are exploring issues in and around furlough, for example. The Scottish Government has never run a furlough

scheme. Obviously, the company was able to be part of a furlough scheme during the coronavirus period, and we are looking at whether that would be useful to the company to retain its workforce. There is also scope to look at whether other work could be provided to keep the local workforce employed. The primary short-term measure is how we support the workforce while developing that order book.

On the fundamental challenges that the member asked about, I have referenced the fact that we have to comply with public procurement regulations, subsidy control and so on. We are looking at how far we can push that and how far we can support local manufacturers while working with procuring authorities—in other words, people who actually own and run buses—to understand the demand and bring that together with a support package for the company. Those are the issues that we are working through and consulting the unions on. I am very hopeful that we can find a solution if we collaborate.

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): The Deputy First Minister says that ADL cannot stand still. It is not standing still—it is moving to Scarborough. She says that she wants to support the company to innovate and bring forward new products. I think that it is a bit late for that. She also says that she wants to collaborate. I agree with her on that. She is busy talking to the Cabinet Secretary for Transport, but she might want to listen. I think that we should collaborate across the chamber.

The Deputy First Minister says that she has formed a task force. I would like to know what the task force has discussed already. To follow on from Michael Matheson's question, what specific things is the task force looking at doing? If the Deputy First Minister wants to collaborate, I suggest that we get on with it in the next few days, because the company has not got long.

Kate Forbes: The task force is a group of officials from the UK and Scottish Governments and it is looking at how far it can push the procurement and subsidy control rules, so it is entirely in line with what has been discussed.

On the point about collaboration, I am more than delighted to collaborate with Graham Simpson on the ideas piece. I imagine that he does not procure buses directly, either. The collaboration that I am talking about is very much with procuring authorities—the people who own and run buses. That is key.

I would not be so quick to dismiss the point about innovation. When we speak to the company, we hear that there are two elements. The first is that it needs an order book and the second is that it needs to be competitive. The research and

development investment that Scottish Enterprise has made, for example, helps it to compete. The two elements are important—reducing the cost base and ensuring that the company has buses to build.

Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): In a statement on 11 June, the chief executive officer of Alexander Dennis said:

“The stark reality is that current UK policy does not allow for the incentivisation or reward of local content, job retention and creation, nor does it encourage any domestic economic benefit.”

He further made it clear that its commitment to the UK is dependent on the content of the UK Government's forthcoming industrial strategy. To what extent has the Scottish Government been consulted in relation to the preparation of said strategy and, in particular, the mitigation of the issues that Alexander Dennis outlined?

Kate Forbes: The member is right to quote the letter and to talk about some of the changes that need to be made. Ultimately, this is about supporting Scotland's industrial base and the wider manufacturing base. We recognise the huge economic impact of the manufacturing sector on our economy, and ADL has long been a critical part of that.

On the UK Government's industrial strategy, we have engaged with the UK Government to represent the interests of Scottish industries. We very quickly engaged with the UK Government on these matters, knowing full well that ADL had already been in touch with it.

The Presiding Officer: I would be grateful if we kept questions and responses concise. There is much interest in asking a question, and we are marching through the available time.

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

The Deputy First Minister's statement is more a defence of the Government's position than it is a plan of action to save these facilities and to save these workers' jobs.

The fact is that the last two factories building buses in Scotland are facing closure at a time when there is no shortage of orders for new buses. That comes in the shadow of the closure of the Grangemouth refinery, and here we are again facing a close-and-import strategy. When is the Government going to recognise that these are strategic national assets? When will we see a proper Scottish Government industrial strategy? When will the Government understand that manufacturing matters, rescue these jobs, prevent these closures and save this industry?

Kate Forbes: Manufacturing does matter. I whole-heartedly agree with Richard Leonard's point that this comes after the impact of Grangemouth, which is why we are focusing all our efforts on finding a solution, and it is why we have been engaging with Unite, GMB, the company, the UK Government and procuring authorities to do that. I am sorry that he felt that my statement was a defence of the Government's position, because as far as I am concerned, it set out a clear road map for how we can find a solution, which will be to secure orders and reduce costs through investment. To me, that is a pretty clear approach for us to take.

There is work to do to deliver that. In my answer to Michael Matheson, I noted some of the points that we might need to address in the short term, which I have been engaging with unions about, so I think that we are all on the same page about what needs to be done. It is not all entirely within the Scottish Government's gift, but we recognise our convening power and ability to bring people together. If we can also get some support from the UK Government on things such as the 2022 act, that will be even more helpful.

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): The prospect of job losses is extremely distressing for workers and their families, and I welcome the Scottish Government's urgency in addressing the matter. Can the Deputy First Minister provide an update on the Scottish Government's latest engagement with the employees of Alexander Dennis and the trade unions to ensure that their voices inform the Scottish Government's work?

Kate Forbes: My approach has been to engage with the unions in an open manner. We have shared the progress that we have made and our thinking with them, and we have tested whether they would support the options that we have identified as a potential route forward, which I think is really important. We recognise that the workforce will be feeling uncertain. Support will be available to them but, to be blunt, my priority is to find an avenue through this and to ensure that the company has a future. I have set out the way in which I think that that can be done.

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): I will leave the party politics out of it for a moment and ask the Deputy First Minister how we can support the workforce. There is a need to retain the workforce, and there may also be a need for retraining, particularly in the short term. I am aware that Forth Valley College has received some funding support from the UK and Scottish Governments to help the Grangemouth workers to retrain and move into sustainable jobs for the future. What kind of discussions has the DFM had with Forth Valley College about supporting the Alexander Dennis workers?

Kate Forbes: The member is absolutely right to identify that the workforce is key. We have been talking about innovation, but skills have to be a part of that. Right now, my primary approach is to work through the unions as representatives of the workforce, which is key. Essentially, I am taking a lead from them on what their priorities are. That has informed my approach so far in looking at how we can make investments to improve productivity, as well as securing orders for the future. Those are the two priorities that have been identified. The member will know, from having engaged with the Government in the past, that we stand ready to support colleges, for example, to provide retraining or skills opportunities. That is definitely an option in this case.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): Flexibility around procurement rules and subsidy control is an age-old problem; we have debated that problem endlessly. What is new about what the Deputy First Minister is setting out today in respect of such flexibility? Is she offering real hope? Is there new flexibility? Can she spell out exactly what she is looking to find?

Kate Forbes: What I am looking to find is a means by which we can work with procuring authorities—people who actually own and run buses, in other words—to secure further orders for ADL. The Scottish Government does not own buses directly, which is why we need to collaborate. Some of the early conversations with the UK Government have been very helpful in that regard, and have helped us to understand what mechanisms are available. The Subsidy Control Act 2022 is reserved to Westminster—it is not brand new, but it is fairly recent, having been enacted in the post-Brexit years—and discussions around that have been useful. I hope that that answers the question about what is new.

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): I welcome the SNP Government's commitment to supporting public transport and operational sustainability, notably through schemes such as the Scottish zero-emission bus challenge fund. Can the minister say more about any support that has been received by Alexander Dennis through that scheme and its predecessor, the Scottish ultra-low-emission bus scheme? Will she tell members how many orders Alexander Dennis has secured through the Scottish Government's funding programmes, such as ScotZEB?

Kate Forbes: I am happy to confirm that, through ScotZEB 2, ADL initially secured orders for 72 of the 252 buses, and that, since 2020, through the Scottish ultra-low-emission bus scheme and the Scottish zero-emission bus challenge fund, it has received £58 million in relation to the procurement and building of buses.

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con):

Along with what happened at Grangemouth, the situation with Alexander Dennis represents a double blow to the people of Falkirk, and my thoughts are with them.

Following the loss of 400 jobs in Grangemouth, up to 1,600 jobs are now on the line as a result of Alexander Dennis being forced to relocate to Scarborough. When will the Scottish Government publish an economic impact assessment for the area?

Kate Forbes: We do not want to lose those jobs, so all of the focus right now is on saving them.

Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP): My question is similar to Meghan Gallacher's. What assessment has been made of the economic impact of the potential job losses, particularly following recent losses of other industrial jobs in Forth valley?

Kate Forbes: As I said to Meghan Gallacher, my primary focus is on protecting the jobs, and that will be my priority.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): We are all behind the Scottish Government and the UK Government as they try to save bus manufacturing in Scotland.

On the point about the forward order book, which is all that matters now, section 12 of the UK Procurement Act 2023, which was commenced in February this year, requires that contracting authorities

"must have regard to the importance of ... maximising public benefit"

when awarding contracts, which is much stronger than the Procurement Reform (Scotland) Act 2014, which only requires authorities to consider social value. Will the Deputy First Minister consider how we can strengthen the language in the 2014 act?

In addition, will the Deputy First Minister take cognisance of the quality concerns that have been raised by bus operators in Scotland, such as McGill's Buses and First Glasgow, around ADL's electric vehicle products compared with their Chinese equivalents? Will she consider how we can establish a kaizen group involving the operators, Scottish Enterprise and the Scottish manufacturing advisory service to provide assurance and restore confidence in ADL's products?

The Presiding Officer: I remind members of the requirement to use a virtual background when participating remotely.

Kate Forbes: The UK Government's Procurement Act 2023 introduced some reforms to procurement procedures in the rest of the UK. In

some ways, it can be said to be an attempt to catch up with the Procurement Reform (Scotland) Act 2014, as that placed a sustainable procurement duty on public bodies that means that, before they carry out a regulated procurement, they must consider how the procurement process can

"improve the economic, social, and environmental wellbeing of the authority's area ... facilitate the involvement of small and medium enterprises, third sector bodies and supported businesses in the process, and ... promote innovation".

The rest of the UK is bound by the same international agreements on procurement as Scotland is, and, in common with the rest of the UK, Scotland cannot legislate to allow for discrimination in favour of domestic bidders at the expense of other bidders with which a relevant trade agreement applies. Those are the issues that we are trying to grapple with.

I am grateful for the tone of Paul Sweeney's question and note that he said that he backs the efforts of both Governments—that is helpful, and I am grateful for it.

Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests—I spent 22 years in the bus industry.

Can the Deputy First Minister confirm that the Scottish Government does not purchase or own any buses, but it provides a grant to bus operators to offset the difference in cost between a diesel bus and a zero-emission bus?

Kate Forbes: Yes, and that is precisely why we are working with procuring authorities.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the ministerial statement.

Business Motion

17:20

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-18035, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on changes to business.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees to the following revisions to the programme of business for Thursday 26 June 2025—

delete

followed by Members' Business

and after

12.00 pm First Minister's Questions

insert

followed by Members' Business—[*Jamie Hepburn*]

Motion agreed to.

Parliamentary Bureau Motion

17:20

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is consideration of Parliamentary Bureau motion S6M-18024, on committee membership. I ask Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, to move the motion.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that—

Alasdair Allan be appointed to replace Elena Whitham as a member of the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee;

Elena Whitham be appointed to replace Gordon MacDonald as a member of the Social Justice and Social Security Committee;

Paul McLennan be appointed to replace Evelyn Tweed as a member of the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee; and

Evelyn Tweed be appointed to replace Emma Roddick as a member of the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee.—[*Jamie Hepburn*]

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

Decision Time

17:21

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

There are three questions to be put as a result of today's business.

The first question is, that amendment S6M-18016.1, in the name of Tess White, which seeks to amend motion S6M-18016, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on progressing the National Advisory Council on Women and Girls recommendations on equality, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

There will be a short suspension to allow members to access the digital voting system.

17:21

Meeting suspended.

17:24

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: We come to the division on amendment S6M-18016.1, in the name of Tess White, which seeks to amend motion S6M-18016, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on progressing the National Advisory Council on Women and Girls recommendations on equality. Members should cast their votes now.

For

Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green) [Proxy vote cast by Ross Greer]
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Rona Mackay]
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Abstentions

Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)

Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba)
 Russell, Davy (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-18016.1, in the name of Tess White, is: For 24, Against 60, Abstentions 16.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-18016, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on progressing the National Advisory Council on Women and Girls recommendations on equality, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament notes the publication of the first Annual Statement on Gender Policy Coherence.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S6M-18024, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on committee membership, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that—

Alasdair Allan be appointed to replace Elena Whitham as a member of the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee;

Elena Whitham be appointed to replace Gordon MacDonald as a member of the Social Justice and Social Security Committee;

Paul McLennan be appointed to replace Evelyn Tweed as a member of the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee; and

Evelyn Tweed be appointed to replace Emma Roddick as a member of the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Meeting closed at 17:26.

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

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