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Tuesday 9 September 2025

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Tuesday 9 September 2025

CONTENTS

	Col.
TIME FOR REFLECTION	1
TOPICAL QUESTION TIME	3
Vapes (Synthetic Drugs)	3
Homeless Accommodation (Local Authority Spending)	6
RELATIONSHIPS AND BEHAVIOUR IN SCHOOLS	10
Statement—[Jenny Gilruth].	
The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth)	10
URGENT QUESTION	26
For Women Scotland (Policing)	26
SCOTLAND'S RAILWAY (20 YEARS)	31
Motion moved—[Fiona Hyslop].	
Amendment moved—[Sue Webber].	
Amendment moved—[Claire Baker].	
The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop)	31
Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con)	36
Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)	40
Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)	44
Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (LD)	46
Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)	48
Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con)	51
Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)	53
Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab)	56
Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)	58
Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con)	60
Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)	62
Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab)	64
Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Reform)	66
Mark Ruskell	67
Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab)	69
Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)	71
Fiona Hyslop	73
BUSINESS MOTIONS	78
Motions moved—[Jamie Hepburn]—and agreed to.	
Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con)	78
The Minister for Parliamentary Business (Jamie Hepburn)	78
DECISION TIME	83
RESIDENTIAL OUTDOOR EDUCATION	91
Motion debated—[Liz Smith].	
Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)	91
Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)	95
Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con)	97
Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab)	98
Annabelle Ewing (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)	100
Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (LD)	102
Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con)	103
Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab)	105
John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)	107
Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Reform)	108
Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab)	110
The Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise (Natalie Don-Innes)	111

Scottish Parliament

Tuesday 9 September 2025

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

Time for Reflection

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Good afternoon. The first item of business is time for reflection, and our time for reflection leader is Margot Henderson, a poet and storyteller.

Margot Henderson: Presiding Officer,

A Time For Reflection is a time to consider
What are we doing here? What are we truly for?
I know I'm wondering what am I doing here!

At 12 years old, my mum was in service
my dad was down a mine, only a generation ago.
They could never have imagined
their wee lassie would be standing here today,
me neither.

It is a reminder that each one of us
walks in the footsteps of those who went before us.
We are here to pass on the best we can
to those who will come after us.

Then there is the more than us,
the birds and bees, the rocks and trees,
the rivers and seas.
We have come to realise
in ever increasing degrees
that we can't take care of anything
if we don't take care of these.

In times like these, we cannot fail to see
the suffering around us, its causes and our complicities.
How can we be the peace?
How can we best serve
this moment we find ourselves in?
The only moment that we ever have, to be alive in.

Let's begin with gratitude
for those who came before us
those who stood for this vision
of a parliament at Holyrood
"a place for the people"
that it might bring about the good.

Gratitude for your being here,
the cells and organs of the body politic,
knowing if you do not work well together,
the body becomes sick.

Being here is a privilege.
Many will never have the chance
to raise their voice in this dedicated chamber.
You speak for them.

This is a moment that will never come again
but isn't every moment like that.
Four minutes isn't very long when there's so much to say
and only 400 words to say it.
Time is precious and these are urgent times.
There is so much to do. I see, this is how it is for you.

If you knew you only had 400 words to say today,
you would choose them well, think carefully
about the story you most want to tell,
knowing words can cast a lasting spell
to heal or harm.

Reflection is a mirror
that can help us see more clearly
what we are and what we are here for.
We are part of One Life,
working together, expressing our differences
without enmity, knowing our commonality.

So we can live the best of our humanity.

Topical Question Time

14:05

Vapes (Synthetic Drugs)

1. **Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking in response to reports that the synthetic drug, spice, has been found in vapes that are being sold to schoolchildren. (S6T-02658)

The Minister for Drug and Alcohol Policy and Sport (Maree Todd): I believe that Mr Gulhane's question relates to media coverage from the weekend about drug dealers in England using social media platforms to target people and to sell illegal vapes that contain the synthetic drug spice. The actions of those dealers are illegal.

The use of vapes containing harmful substances among young people is highly concerning. Social media platforms have a clear responsibility to support law enforcement and prevent illegal activity on their sites that risks harming young people. I know that the Minister for Victims and Community Safety and the Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise are leading a new task force to look at online harms, and they have been engaging with the United Kingdom Government to look more closely at the Online Safety Act 2023, which is, of course, reserved legislation.

As well as the drug enforcement activity that is led by Police Scotland, the Scottish Government is carrying out substance use education work in our schools through the curriculum for excellence. We are also investing £750,000 this year in Planet Youth, which is a community-led approach to creating healthier environments for young people and preventing substance use.

Sandesh Gulhane: I declare my interest as a practising national health service general practitioner.

This is not just a problem in England. The threat to our children from vapes that are laced with illicit substances is becoming ever more terrifying. Last year, data from Scottish local authorities showed that there were 120 incidents in the previous three years of schoolchildren—some as young as primary school age—using vapes containing illicit substances. In March this year, in Dalkeith, two boys aged just 14 were hospitalised after inhaling from an illegal vape that was laced with spice.

Spice is a highly addictive drug that can cause severe health consequences such as psychosis, seizures and serious heart problems. That drug should be nowhere near our children.

I assume that the minister shares my concern that urgent action needs to be taken to prevent serious harm to our children. What tangible action will she take?

Maree Todd: I certainly do share the member's concern. Data from Public Health Scotland's early warning system RADAR—rapid action drug alerts and response—has flagged an increase in tetrahydrocannabinol and synthetic cannabis in vapes, so the issue is not entirely restricted to England.

As I mentioned, while regulation of the internet remains reserved, we have successfully engaged with the UK Government on strengthening protections for children under its Online Safety Act 2023. Ofcom, the regulator, has published codes of practice for online platforms on illegal harms and protecting children from harm online. We will continue to work with the UK Government and Ofcom on implementation of the 2023 act and to press for stronger protections to keep children and young people safe while they are online.

The Scottish Government's ministerial online safety task force, which is led by the Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise and the Minister for Victims and Community Safety, is absolutely focused on strengthening our approach to keeping children safe while they are online.

Sandesh Gulhane: Spice could be a potential gateway drug to addiction. The Scottish Government cannot afford to be complacent. There has been a sharp increase in the overall number of drug deaths in 2025. In the first quarter, there were 33 per cent more suspected drug deaths than in the previous quarter. The latest figures, which cover April to June, show that the number of drug deaths rose by 11 per cent when compared with the same period in 2014. Scotland is the drug deaths capital of Europe for the seventh year in a row.

Successive ministers have told us that drug consumption rooms save lives, but there is no tangible evidence to support that claim. The facts are being ignored and the Scottish National Party is ploughing ahead with plans for another drug consumption facility in Edinburgh. That will simply not help our children who are vaping and consuming drugs. Is it not time that the Scottish Government took a new approach to tackling the drug deaths crisis in Scotland?

Maree Todd: Let me be clear with the member, as I have been many times previously. The safer drug consumption room is not the only tool that we are deploying against the dreadful toll of drug deaths that we are experiencing in Scotland. It is one of a range of evidence-based harm-reduction opportunities that we have.

The safer drug consumption facility does not cover vaping—we have wandered off in quite a different direction. There is no provision for inhalation in that facility—it is an injection-only facility.

We have widened access to treatment, we have increased the number of funded places at residential rehab and the capacity of residential rehab, and we have rolled out a world-leading naloxone programme, so that all our front-line staff, including police officers, ambulance crews and community pharmacists, have access to life-saving naloxone in the event of overdoses nearby.

The member is correct that the figures from this year are alarming. The statistics that came out today on suspected drug deaths in the first six months of the year show a 3 per cent increase. We are very much aware of the risks that are posed, and we are keen to work with the UK Government on drug-checking facilities. I think that they would reduce the contamination that we are experiencing in the market, which is causing so much harm in Scotland.

Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP): I remind members that I am employed as a bank nurse by NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde.

The rise in the use of synthetic drugs is a concern. As has been clear through the RADAR system, nitazenes and synthetic opioids are highly dangerous because of their potency. Will the minister outline what steps can be taken to reduce the risk of overdose—for example, through the use of naloxone kits? How can members help to inform people about the risks that are posed?

Maree Todd: The member is absolutely correct that the increased prevalence of new synthetic substances such as nitazenes is of real concern, not just here in Scotland but across the whole UK and globally. We are working hard to respond to the growing threat from those highly dangerous synthetic substances. They can be hundreds of times more potent than heroin, and they can increase the risk of overdose, hospitalisation and death. That is what we are seeing in our early statistics from the start of this year.

We are working with partners to communicate vital information and advice. I would encourage anyone who might be affected to familiarise themselves with that advice, including the new nitazene alert that was issued by Public Health Scotland on 12 August. The alert stresses that, although there is absolutely

"no safe way to take nitazenes ... There are ways to reduce the risk of harm and overdose".

The drug that has been purchased might not always be the drug that it is expected to be. The harm-reduction advice is that people should take the smallest amount that they can, leave as long as they can between doses and ensure that there are people around who can respond in the event of an emergency.

I urge anyone who carries naloxone to consider carrying extra life-saving kits with them. We know that, because of the high potency of nitazenes, repeat doses of naloxone are very likely to be required.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): Product safety is at the heart of the issue. The vapes are being marketed not as containing spice but as containing THC. The study by the University of Bath, which covered about 2,000 vapes across 114 schools in seven regions in England, found that contamination with spice ranged from 13 per cent to 25 per cent in the case of London and Lancashire. Will the minister consider undertaking a similar discrete study to understand the prevalence of spice contamination in vapes in schools in Scotland and to ensure that we can take preventative measures accordingly?

Maree Todd: We are aware from the RADAR system that spice is being detected in vape products here in Scotland, too. I will certainly consider the idea of an academic study; I read the study from Bath university with interest.

Let me be absolutely clear that selling class B drugs such as spice is already illegal, selling vapes to children is already illegal and using online social media platforms to target children and young people to sell drugs is illegal. Anyone who has information regarding people who are involved in the supply of illegal vapes should contact Police Scotland on 101 or Crimestoppers.

Homeless Accommodation (Local Authority Spending)

2. **Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to reports that Scottish local authorities spent over £100 million last year on bed and breakfast and hostel accommodation for homeless people. (S6T-02649)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): The Scottish Government's ambition is to prevent homelessness as part of our Housing (Scotland) Bill, and for every homeless household to have a settled home that meets their needs. The solution is to deliver more homes and to make better use of the homes that we have.

Last week, the Cabinet Secretary for Housing set out plans to invest up to £4.9 billion in affordable homes over the next four years. We are doubling the funding that is available for acquisitions to £80 million this year so that councils and housing associations can purchase

properties for those households who are spending too long in temporary accommodation. We will also invest an additional £4 million this year to expand the delivery of housing first tenancies.

Mark Griffin: The cabinet secretary will know that it costs councils around £11,000 to deal with each homelessness application. Given that almost 4,000 homelessness applications were made in Edinburgh alone last year, does the cabinet secretary agree that councils should be able to spend their limited funds on preventing homelessness, instead of on firefighting the effects of a housing emergency? How does the Scottish Government plan to support local authorities to cover the increased cost, which is up 128 per cent since 2020-21?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I thank Mark Griffin for his question, because it is important that we focus on what can be done at Scottish Government, local government and United Kingdom Government levels to tackle the unacceptable numbers of people—children, in particular—who are in temporary accommodation.

It has been good to see that positive progress has been made in a number of local authorities, including Aberdeenshire, East Ayrshire, East Lothian and South Ayrshire councils, all of which have consistently seen decreases in the number of homelessness applications and in the use of temporary accommodation.

Funding is provided by the Scottish Government to local authorities, including through the general grant, and it is important to recognise the work that is undertaken through that funding, which looks in particular at preventative methods. I have mentioned some of the additional funding that we will be providing this year, but there is also the work that we do to provide support to councils, particularly—but not solely—Glasgow and Edinburgh councils, which have been considerably affected by the increased pressures. Although this is an issue throughout Scotland, we are seeing progress in many local authorities.

Mark Griffin: I thank the cabinet secretary for her response and acknowledge the action that has been outlined today and was outlined in the chamber last week by the Cabinet Secretary for Housing. However, the housing crisis has not appeared overnight; it has been nearly 18 months since the Government declared a housing emergency, and yet since then, record numbers of children have been placed in temporary accommodation, often in the most appalling and unsafe conditions. Council workers report that they have seen very little change in the Government's approach since the declaration.

On last week's statement, it is not enough to say that we can help a few hundred children. The use of B and Bs and hostels for homeless children should end immediately. Will the cabinet secretary commit to ending the scandal of children in B and B and hostel accommodation entirely, as a priority of the Government?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: We are working hard with our local authority partners to ensure that families with children, in particular, although not solely families with children, are accommodated correctly. For example, 2,700 households with children have been assisted into affordable housing since December 2024. That is part of the work that the Government has been doing in our delivery of 139,000 homes, including 99,000 for social rent, since 2007.

It is important that we look at how we can best make use of existing stock through our work on voids in the social rented sector and on empty properties in the private sector, which is exactly why additional funding has been going in. The work that the Cabinet Secretary for Housing announced last week clearly builds on the work that has already been undertaken on acquisitions, empty homes and voids to ensure that we are delivering for local authorities and registered social landlords to support them in providing good affordable homes.

Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): Will the cabinet secretary advise what further help can be provided to local authorities to maximise the use of actual housing for temporary accommodation versus the use of totally unacceptable, below-tolerable-standard hotels? I saw that first hand when the North Ayrshire Council homelessness team disinvested from such accommodation. It made a monumental difference to the people being supported by providing a safer and more secure stopover while they waited for a permanent tenancy. Our work reduced overall costs to the council and improved the lives of those involved. Given the pressures on supply, doing such work is even more challenging now, but it is fundamental for people's dignity, along with deploying the really important prevention measures.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: It is important to ensure that we do all that we can, working with our local authority partners, to deliver affordable homes. That is exactly why the Cabinet Secretary for Housing last week announced a doubling—from £40 million to £80 million—of acquisitions investment for this financial year.

We have again asked councils to prioritise the acquisition of family homes and to contact every household with children living in quality temporary accommodation to establish whether those homes can be made permanent. Local authorities already have the ability to do that and, although many local authorities use that practice, which is known

as “flipping”, as a useful part of their housing policies, other local authorities could do more in that regard.

It is important to look at what can be done with the social rented housing that we have but also to look at the support that the Scottish Government is providing—on top of the previous investment of £40 million, which is now £80 million—to acquire more homes. Building additional housing is also very important.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): That concludes topical questions. I will allow a few moments for those on the front benches to reorganise themselves before we move to the next item of business.

Relationships and Behaviour in Schools

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is a statement by Jenny Gilruth on actions to support improved relationships and behaviour in schools. The cabinet secretary will take questions at the end of her statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

14:21

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): In May, I updated Parliament on progress to deliver the national action plan on behaviour and relationships in schools, which was published last August. At that time, I committed to updating Parliament following the publication of new guidance on consequences, and my statement today fulfils that commitment.

Almost 4,000 school staff from all over Scotland participated in the “Behaviour in Scottish Schools” report, which was published in November 2023. That research captured the challenges in our schools, particularly following the pandemic, highlighting trends of worsening behaviour, challenges with communication in some of our youngest pupils and a worrying increase in misogyny.

However, it would be too easy to paint a relentlessly negative picture of school life in Scotland. For context, the majority of school staff reported generally good behaviour by most or all pupils. We all have a responsibility, as MSPs, not to seek to demonise a generation of young people and must all remember that those are the young people who lived through a global pandemic.

However, we must prevent violence and aggression and must also address the issues that school staff identified as having the greatest overall negative impact: talking out of turn, hindering other pupils from getting on with their work, and the inappropriate use of mobile phones. That is the evidence base that has informed the national guidance on consequences.

Teachers—because of their aptitude, knowledge, skills and pedagogy—know how to get the best from our young people and how to manage and support them. At times, as is the case here in the chamber, keeping everyone engaged and attentive can be challenging. Disruption happens, depending on the class, the time of day and proximity to the end of term. Our teachers use a variety of tools to maintain order every day. Sometimes, a tone of voice or a stern look is sufficient to help someone get back on track. Sometimes, a reminder of expectations of

behaviour and agreed practices is required to stop matters from escalating. Occasionally, greater action is required, including time out of class or, as a last resort, exclusion. In my experience, what is needed always depends on the situation and on the young person.

During the launch of the consequences guidance at St Brendan's primary school in Motherwell, I was impressed by how readily children who were as young as eight could articulate the processes for resolving conflict. Pupils spoke confidently about their responsibility to try to resolve disputes themselves in the first instance before asking for help from peer mediators and then, if they were still struggling, seeking the support of a trusted adult. The parents I spoke to at St Brendan's understood that their children are still developing and that within every school, irrespective of its strengths, there will, at times, be challenges.

However, what parents really valued at St Brendan's was the headteacher's consistent communication about what was being done when problems arose and how they, as parents, were being supported. Parents at St Brendan's trusted teachers to take the necessary steps that were appropriate to the situation to keep their children safe, and, in so doing, to allow them to learn.

The thoughtful practice that was exhibited by staff at St Brendan's primary school, under the watchful leadership of the headteacher, Maura Oates, can be found in schools all over Scotland today. The approaches that are used by staff at St Brendan's reflect the intent and purpose behind the national guidance, which has had direct input from teachers. Consequences are an essential part of a supportive learning environment. Setting boundaries for children and young people supports their development and, crucially, helps them to feel safe. Indeed, that mirrors good parenting advice and practice.

It is clear that relationships and behaviour in our schools have changed following the pandemic. Lockdown impacted on the understanding of expectations, and there is a need for all members of the school community—staff, young people and parents—to work together to reset that relationship. Our teachers cannot do that on their own.

The consequences guidance reinforces the principles of prevention and de-escalation, which underpin our approach to relationships and behaviour in schools. The guidance seeks to ensure that everyone in a school community understands the boundaries and expectations for behaviour and the processes for when things go wrong. It emphasises the importance of taking the action that is required in the moment to ensure a safe and respectful learning environment. It is underpinned by reflective questions and illustrative examples of consequences that can be used to support schools' decision making.

It is important that the guidance was overseen by the Scottish advisory group on relationships and behaviour in schools—also known as SAGRABIS—which includes representatives from local government, the teaching trade unions, parents' representatives, educational psychologists, speech and language therapists and violence prevention experts. Crucially, the guidance was created by an experienced group of practitioners, which includes current headteachers, members of our teaching trade unions and educational psychologists. The consequences that are provided for in the guidance are therefore drawn from practice that is recognised as effective by the professionals whom we trust to work in our schools every day. Those people are the experts in what works. The NASUWT has welcomed the publication of the guidance, saying that it is

"an important step forward in our continued focus on driving down levels of disruption and violence in our schools."

The consequences guidance was published alongside an update on risk assessments, to support schools in dealing with violent and aggressive behaviour. New guidance on risk assessments gives support to staff to identify and assess risk associated with a young person's behaviour and to plan the actions that might be taken to control or mitigate that risk. The risk assessment guidance also contains a range of examples from schools across Scotland, which staff can use and adapt for their own context. Although risk assessments should be used only in the most severe cases, where there is a foreseeable risk of harm or a pattern of behaviour causing concern, they are an important tool for ensuring that appropriate strategies are in place to support a young person and to support schools to keep everyone safe.

We also need to support implementation in our schools, which is why Education Scotland has produced new online practical resources on relationships and behaviour. A programme of professional learning is being delivered between now and December, including bespoke sessions on the new guidance. Over the past two weeks alone, more than 350 staff attended a webinar on the consequences guidance, and a further 169 attended a session on the new risk assessment update.

However, the publication of the consequences guidance reflects only the latest progress in delivering our national action plan. Last year, alongside the national action plan, we published clear national guidance on mobile phones, anti-bullying measures and responding to racism and

racist incidents. That is in addition to action on preventing gender-based violence in schools through the gender-based violence framework. That work has been further strengthened by the launch of the digital discourse initiative, a resource that supports teachers to challenge online hate and disinformation, which we know is disproportionately impacting women and girls in our schools.

Changing behaviours requires support, which is why we have put in place extra funding for training and support staff. Additionally, during this financial year, we have provided a further £29 million to recruit and retain staff to support children and young people with additional support needs, and we have increased funding to £186.5 million to help councils to maintain teacher numbers.

The national action plan, as members know, is a three-year plan. The next steps will focus on working with local councils to improve the consistency of recording and monitoring incidents, update our national guidance on exclusions, publish whole-school approaches to addressing racism and racist incidents in schools, and improve attendance, on which I will launch our national marketing campaign in the coming week.

All MSPs and parties carry a responsibility to support Scotland's children and young people in our schools and the school staff who work hard to support their outcomes and life chances. In April last year, I met the Opposition party leaders to talk to them about the development of the national action plan. I am also keen to visit a school with Opposition spokespeople so that, together, we can observe the impact in practice of the national behaviour action plan. I am absolutely delighted that St Brendan's primary school has agreed to host such a visit. My private office will be in touch in due course to arrange a mutually convenient time for us all to attend a visit that I think will be really worth while.

There is no place for violence or abuse by anyone, of anyone, about anything, in our schools. When it occurs, it requires an immediately escalated response. If a child's behaviour poses a risk of harm to themselves or others, staff need to respond very quickly. Supporting and empowering our teachers to do that has been a central part of my approach in the development of our national action plan. The national guidance was written by, with and for our teachers—the very teachers to whom we entrust the education of our children and young people every day. The national action plan provides that shared vision, with a consistent approach that provides a strong platform on which to act. I remain committed to delivering on that ambition. Scotland's schools must be safe, positive and inclusive spaces for learning, for every teacher and member of staff and, crucially, for all our children and young people.

The Presiding Officer: The cabinet secretary will now take questions on the issues that were raised in her statement. I intend to allow around 20 minutes for that, after which we will move on to the next item of business. I would be grateful if members who wish to put a question were to press their request-to-speak buttons now.

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): I thank the cabinet secretary for advance sight of her statement. Before the schools returned, I spoke to several teachers who told me that, for the first time in their careers, they did not want to go back to school, due to the levels of poor discipline and violence that they have personally experienced in their schools. Today's statement is very much a repeat of what the Scottish Government has already outlined. Unbelievably, it concerns a national action plan that includes no new actions—just more talking and a marketing campaign.

I will outline my concerns to the cabinet secretary. I believe that the Government has failed to take forward real changes. There are no clear outcomes or consequences in the guidance on how teachers can respond to any violence that they might experience. Teachers who are punched or who have chairs thrown at them do not need to be told to undertake a risk assessment. The Scottish Government's incoherent guidance and reluctance to even mention effective consequences, let alone apply them, is letting down hard-working school staff and the majority of pupils who simply want to learn without disruption. Is the cabinet secretary asking pupils, teachers, parents and carers to wait another two years before the Government will outline how it will get a grip of violence in our schools?

Jenny Gilruth: This year, there have been a number of new developments in relation to the national action plan, which I have set out to the Parliament today. The Opposition asked that we do that at the end of the previous term. We were not able to accommodate that request in the final week of that term, due to the stage 3 proceedings of the Education (Scotland) Bill, so I am pleased to have done so today.

The guidance that was published at the end of last term was new, as far as the provisions on consequences were concerned. It was, of course, welcomed by the NASUWT. I put on record again that all our teaching unions have been involved in the development of the advice—it has not come from the Government or ministers—and it is important that we respect their views on what works. It is hugely important to remember that those people are the experts in our schools, and we place our trust in them every day.

Miles Briggs mentioned speaking to teachers over the summer recess. I did so, too, and I engage with the teaching profession regularly. I hope that the member will take up my offer to visit St Brendan's to talk to the teachers in that school, who, at the end of June, were very clear with me about the difference that having high expectations and a really consistent approach to behaviour in their school makes to how they can drive learning and teaching.

Fundamentally, we need calm and consistent learning environments in our classrooms. Good behaviour allows teachers to teach. The national action plan is part of the solution, but I accept the member's challenge that it is not the whole solution. We have to look more broadly than at schools alone.

For example, one point that I made in my statement was about the need for partners to work together. Last night, I attended the annual general meeting of the Glenrothes and Levenmouth District Scouts, where people were talking about the involvement of parents and carers in the wider community. This cannot be just about schools—we have to have a broader integration of support in relation to the expectations for our children and young people.

I hope that the member will engage with me on the next steps in relation to the action plan. Indeed, if he has any further concrete suggestions that he would like to bring to the table, I will be happy to hear from him—although I put on the record that the examples that are provided in the consequences guidance have come from the teaching profession itself.

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): I thank the cabinet secretary for advance sight of her statement. Scottish Labour welcomes the publication of guidance on consequences and risk assessments; indeed, we and others have been calling for those things for many years. However, I have to say to the cabinet secretary that it is not enough.

The need for change is urgent, yet it has been three academic years since research showed rising concern about behaviour. In that time, Scotland's incredible young people have achieved a lot against the odds, and school staff have risen to the challenges as they always do. However, the reality is that they have done that without the widespread change of direction that is needed from their Government.

The statement failed to address the issues of rising staff workload, a demoralised workforce, and young people who are failed by a lack of support for additional support needs, and next to no access to attention deficit hyperactivity disorder assessments, and child and adolescent mental health services care. It failed to address the systemic change that is needed.

What changes will the Government make to workforce planning to meet the on-going challenges? What additional new action will the cabinet secretary take to address the lack of support for pupils with ASN? Finally, and crucially, why has it taken three academic years for us to get a statement that contains no new actions, and that fails to rise to the systemic challenges that schools face?

Jenny Gilruth: I thank Ms Duncan-Glancy for welcoming the guidance. However, I put on the record that I think that that was an unfair characterisation of the Government's actions since the publication of the BISSR report. I will therefore recount some of the actions that we have taken since the publication of that research.

One of the issues that BISSR highlighted was the role of school inspections in gathering data. Now, the chief inspector is taking direct action to ensure that we have enhanced evidence on relationships and behaviour from every school inspection. I announced that change in November 2023. We also provided funding to support staff and, for example, those who work with challenging behaviour directly in our schools. That was a direct response to the BISSR report's findings, which I also announced in 2023. We also provided support to improve attendance, including guidance on professional learning, networking and exemplification.

Today, I have given a statement on consequences and risk assessments that relate to the national action plan, which I launched last year. It is therefore an unfair characterisation to suggest that no action has been taken in the interim period. In that period, there has also been the publication of the gender-based violence in schools framework, which has been important in challenging issues around misogyny, which is currently a toxic issue in our schools and, of course, in our political discourse. There was also the interim guidance on racism and racist incidents and the mobile phone guidance that was issued last year.

Therefore, I do not accept that the examples that I provided today in relation to risk assessments and consequences sit in a silo. They are part of a package of responses and funding from this Government, which I have spoken to.

I am conscious of the time, Presiding Officer. The member also made a number of points in relation to staff workload and workforce planning. I hope that it will give her some comfort to know that I will meet representatives of the General Teaching Council for Scotland later this week in relation to those very issues.

Staff workload is a matter for the Scottish Negotiating Committee for Teachers, but I am absolutely committed to our manifesto commitment to reduce class contact. Only by creating the time for teachers will we get the conditions that are necessary to drive education reform.

Ms Duncan-Glancy's final point related to ASN. She and I, and other members from across the chamber, met to discuss the ASN review last week. I look forward to working with the member on that point and, I hope, arriving at a cross-party consensus on how we can drive a review that meets the aspirations that she rightly set out.

The Presiding Officer: There is a great deal of interest in the statement, so concise questions and responses would be appreciated.

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): The importance of the contribution of pupils feeling supported towards improving their behaviour in schools cannot be overestimated. Will the minister speak further on how the Scottish Government's 2025-26 budget is delivering measures to assist young folk throughout every stage of their school experience?

Jenny Gilruth: As I alluded to in my statement, the budget makes provision for an extra £29 million in relation to additional support needs. I was very keen that that additionality was used to support, for example, additional specialist staff, whom we know make a real difference in our classrooms. However, the budget also provided for an uplift in funding to protect teacher numbers.

Pupil teacher ratios in Scotland are lower than anywhere else in the United Kingdom. That is welcome, but having an adequate complement of staff in our schools is fundamental to driving the change in behaviour that we need to see. The budget sets out the extra provision of support that is available.

Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): The statement mentions that

"Consequences are an essential part of a supportive learning environment."

The cabinet secretary knows that I agree with that.

As the next steps include

"updating our national guidance on exclusions",

could the cabinet secretary elaborate on the detail? Will the new guidance result in more exclusions? Given the dubiety that the Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise displayed in the Education, Children and Young People Committee a few months ago about whether care-experienced children should be excluded, how does the cabinet secretary hope to balance the guidance with commitments that have been made to care-experienced people in the Promise?

Jenny Gilruth: We have discussed expectations around exclusion at length in the chamber. In recent years—I can give the member the statistics on this if she wants, though I suspect that she will not welcome them—we have seen a real reduction in the number of exclusions and perhaps a reticence from staff to use them as a consequence in order to respond to challenging behaviour. I have been absolutely clear that exclusions exist for a reason—they can and should be used and applied by teachers, and it is in their professional gift to do so. They have my full support to use them in scenarios that merit such a response.

The member asked a question in relation to care-experienced young people. Again, I put on the record that I am recused from the Promise, as the member will know. However, I will ask the Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise to write to her directly on the important issue that she has raised today.

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): I am sure that, like me, many members will have had mailbags full of various commentary about the challenges, disruption and bad behaviour that are caused by mobile devices in classrooms. I have recently been watching a Korean drama in which mobile phones are collected at the start of every lesson. A few months ago, I visited a private school in my constituency where they collect mobile phones at the beginning of the day.

Does the cabinet secretary share my view that we need to look at all that very carefully? We need to create some kind of universality, because our schools have divergent policies on mobile phones. Would it not be best for teachers just to collect them at the start of each lesson in order to avoid such challenges, disruption and bad behaviour?

Jenny Gilruth: I put on the record that I am very sorry to learn that Mr Stewart will be standing down at the end of the parliamentary session. He will be sorely missed by the Scottish National Party group.

The use of mobile phones in our schools was an issue that was highlighted by the behaviour in Scottish schools research, and the teaching trade unions have done a great deal of work on the impact that mobile phones can have in our classrooms. I have often reflected on the use of mobile phones in the chamber, and the member might have a view on confiscating MSPs' phones in order to improve all our behaviour. There is something in the mix to consider about how adults behave and how we expect young people to behave. Mobile phones affect us all when it comes to how we engage and speak to one another,

whether we pay attention in debates or what we do when we sit in committees—I am not immune from that.

As a teacher, I undertook the practice of gathering mobile phones. It can be challenging and can lead to conflict. The national guidance sets out a consistent national approach that empowers headteachers to ban mobile phones should they see fit. The legislative power to do so does not currently sit as a ministerial power in Scotland, but I take on board Mr Stewart's point.

I see that the Presiding Officer is gesticulating. Lots of schools take different approaches to banning mobile phones. The school that I last taught in has a very effective policy in place. I am more than happy to take the points that Mr Stewart has raised today back to the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities in our discussions about how the bans are operating in practice.

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): In her statement, the cabinet secretary talked about working with local councils to improve consistency in recording and monitoring incidents. In 2023, she spoke about work to alter school inspections in order to capture that data. How will the consistency in applying consequences be monitored across local authorities by the Scottish Government?

Jenny Gilruth: In Scotland, we have 32 local authorities with a statutory responsibility for delivering education. One of the challenges that we have often seen with recording bullying incidents is a lack of consistency across the piece. That is why, for example, when Opposition parties submit freedom of information requests to local authorities, it is very difficult to get a read-across, because the authorities might use completely different systems in recording and monitoring. I want to see far greater consistency in that regard.

One action that we are taking, which we announced in the programme for government, is to hold a data conference with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and statisticians in the Scottish Government to talk directly to them about the practicalities of how they gather data at local level.

We are also having discussions—later this afternoon, in fact—with the education and childcare assurance board, along with local government, to talk about the operability of SEEMiS. As the member will know, as a fellow teacher, the operability of SEEMiS varies between different local authorities. That may change the way in which incidents are recorded and, in so doing, may not allow us to take a consistent look across the piece.

I accept the point that the member has raised, but I hope that he will take some comfort from the action that we are taking with regard to the data summit and the work that I will undertake later this afternoon with the education and childcare assurance board.

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): I want to focus on the further £29 million for children with additional support needs, which—as the cabinet secretary knows—applies to an extensive range of needs, from bereavement counselling and support to dyslexia and extreme behavioural challenges as a result of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and autism. For those children, to be frank, inclusion—at least full time—is not suitable.

Will some of that £29 million be applied to alternatives to inclusion, either whole or part time, in the interests of the most challenging children and of their classmates?

Jenny Gilruth: I discussed that issue last week with members of the Opposition, with regard to the review that I mentioned in my response to Ms Duncan-Glancy. It is now more than 20 years since the introduction of the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004, and in that time we have seen an exponential increase in the number of pupils with an additional support need. The current ASN landscape in Scotland looks markedly different from that which existed back in 2004.

On the member's point about the £29 million, I have made clear, in engaging with local authorities, my expectation that that money will be used for specialist staff. The member talked about it being used to support bespoke approaches. I have seen local councils and headteachers using a variety of different approaches at present, including, for example, taking small groups of children out of class to provide them with bespoke, tailored support. Some of the money for that currently comes from pupil equity funding. I hope and expect that the £29 million that the member mentions will be used to employ additional specialist staff in our schools.

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): The principle of consent is an essential part of effective sex and relationships education and can help to tackle issues of behaviour and violence at their root. Does the cabinet secretary agree that if we are to tackle those issues of behaviour and violence, in particular against women and girls, all young people, especially boys and young men, should receive education on the importance of consent?

Jenny Gilruth: It is hugely important that young people are taught about these issues in school. The member will be aware that we are reviewing the relationships, sexual health and parenthood education guidance in that regard. We published

an analysis of the responses to the guidance at the end of March, and the updated guidance will be published before the end of the current term. I think that the member has previously asked me questions on the issue, and I am happy to meet him to discuss the topic that he has raised today, because it is hugely important.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): The guidance on behaviour is incredibly long, and the section on consequences is stuck at the back, in an appendix, so I am sceptical about what impact it will have on actual classroom practice. I am keen to hear from the cabinet secretary when she will measure the impact of the guidance, and when the next survey will be conducted.

Secondly, is the cabinet secretary prepared to move on mobile phones? I receive numerous reports of different practices in different schools, even though the evidence is now pretty compelling on the improvement in behaviour if mobile phones are removed not just from the classroom, but from the school.

Jenny Gilruth: I appreciate that the guidance is long and there are appendices—I think that that is welcome, and my hope is that the consequences element is not lost. There are a number of different prompts at the back of the guidance—it is not an exhaustive list, but the examples have come directly from teachers themselves.

My expectation, from engaging with the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland, is that the behaviour guidance will be used, for example, to inform in-service training days; I know that a number of schools were doing that at the start of term on returning from the summer holidays a couple of weeks ago.

It is important that the national guidance informs different approaches in our schools. The issue was raised with me earlier this year by Mike Corbett from NASUWT Scotland, and as a result—as Mr Rennie will know—Tony Buchanan and I wrote directly to all directors to encourage schools to update their guidance accordingly. It will take time, and I accept that.

Mr Rennie asked when we will measure the impact of the guidance. It is a three-year plan, so he can expect another update from the Government next year in relation to the progress that we have made.

With regard to mobile phones, I think that I responded to Mr Stewart on that, and we have previously talked about this issue at length in the chamber. At the current time, the legislative power does not rest with ministers—it is a matter for local authorities. I have been clear that we trust our headteachers to take decisions about mobile phones. However, I accept Mr Rennie's point about their absence improving educational outcomes in our classrooms. Every headteacher whom I have spoken to who has imposed a ban has seen a direct correlation between the ban and an improvement in learning and teaching. I will take away the point that the member raises today, but, in the national guidance, we have been very clear that I—and, certainly, the Government—support a mobile phone ban.

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): Over recent years, my office and I have received an increased number of queries relating to bullying in schools. Indeed, just yesterday at one of my surgeries, I saw a constituent who had had to move her child to another primary school due to extreme levels of bullying that were having a detrimental impact on the young person's wellbeing.

The cabinet secretary has always been clear that bullying is not acceptable, and she worked on the issue even before she entered Government. I therefore ask her for an update on plans to tackle bullying in our schools and on how it sits within the national action plan that she has updated us on today.

Jenny Gilruth: I thank Mr MacGregor for his question and I am sorry to hear the examples that he has cited. Again, I put on the record that bullying of any kind is unacceptable and must be addressed promptly and effectively.

In November last year, we published updated anti-bullying guidance, "Respect for All", for all adults who are working with children and young people. That refreshed guidance brings together the updates to the previous version of "Respect for All" that we published in 2017, as well as additional guidance on recording and monitoring, which is another issue that has been raised today. The guidance aims to encourage a proactive and inclusive anti-bullying approach and it supports all adults who are working with or caring for children and young people to create inclusive environments where bullying is not able to thrive.

We have also updated the national definition of bullying by simplifying the language, because recording it has been a challenge at times. That update will also provide more examples of what is and is not bullying.

If Mr MacGregor would like to write to me with more examples, I would be more than happy to correspond with him or meet him to discuss the issues that he has raised on behalf of his constituents.

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): The cabinet secretary mentioned the statement that she gave in the chamber in May about the issue. During that exchange, I asked her about supply teachers in particular and the group Scottish Teachers for Permanence, and she

responded to that question. I followed it up again on 11 June at the Education, Children and Young People Committee, and asked when the cabinet secretary would meet Scottish Teachers for Permanence. She said:

"I am scheduled to meet the group's members shortly. You raised this ... with me in the chamber and I am scheduled to meet them in the coming weeks, I think—before the end of the term."—[*Official Report, Education, Children and Young People Committee,* 11 June 2025; c 25.]

I have spoken with Scottish Teachers for Permanence this afternoon. Not only do its members say that the cabinet secretary has not met them, but they say that they have had no correspondence with the cabinet secretary since November last year. Why is the cabinet secretary saying that she will be meeting the group's members when they have not heard from her? Does she agree that she should meet them as a matter of priority?

Jenny Gilruth: I gently say to Mr Ross that his final statement in relation to there having been no correspondence since last November is not accurate. There has been consistent correspondence between my private office and the group that he outlined. My special adviser contacted it during summer recess and we have not heard back from the group. We have tried repeatedly to obtain a date to meet the group. I have now—on the record—committed three times to doing so, but the group has not yet replied. I put that on the record today. If Mr Ross would like, I can share details of that correspondence and our attempts to arrange that meeting. I would be very pleased to have the meeting that I have already agreed to.

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): Violence against women and girls has no place in Scotland's society, and the opportunity to establish that precedent in the classroom is an important step in tackling the issue.

Will the cabinet secretary advise on the ways in which Scottish Government investment and guidance are contributing towards addressing gender-based violence in schools?

Jenny Gilruth: The Government is absolutely clear that harassment or abuse in any form—whether that is in the workplace, in schools or in the home—is completely reprehensible and has to stop. The conduct and behaviour of perpetrators need to change if we are to end harassment and abuse. We have to tackle the underlying attitudes and inequalities that perpetuate such behaviour.

As I alluded to earlier, we have published a national framework for schools to help to tackle sexual harassment and gender-based violence. We are also funding Time for Inclusive Education's digital discourse initiative, to ensure that it remains free for schools to access. That is really important.

Earlier this year, I was at Stonelaw high school for the launch of that initiative, and I talked to teachers and young people about their experiences of behaviour online. It is important that that new resource supports our teachers to challenge the online hate and disinformation that, as I mentioned earlier, is disproportionately impacting girls and female staff in our schools.

Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con): I attended the Government's youth violence summit, where young people told the cabinet secretary that actions must have consequences. The latest Scottish Government guidance says that teachers should make eye contact and use hand signals to address bad behaviour, and that exclusion is a "last resort". Eye contact and hand signals are not consequences. Will the cabinet secretary tell the young people who we met what the consequences actually are for abusive behaviour in the classroom? Does she think that a pupil should be excluded if they physically attack a teacher?

Jenny Gilruth: It is difficult to comment on individual circumstances. In relation to the point that the member raised, my expectation is that pupils would be excluded. The guidance sets out a number of different approaches to classroom management. Eye contact is an approach to classroom management, and I also observe that it is an approach to how we all manage ourselves in the chamber. If we did not have eye contact, we would not be able to talk to one other. Part of this is about improving relationships in schools with our young people and staff.

The member talked about examples. A range of examples is included in the consequences guidance, such as being educated elsewhere in the school

"for a period of time... to allow matters to calm, time for planning and for any additional staffing or alternative placements to be put in place".

Other examples are "exclusion from school", which we have discussed previously, and the

"Risk Assessment and safety planning... if appropriate, that may have mitigations that are restrictive or limiting"

for the pupil concerned.

Ash Regan (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba): Smartphones in schools are harming mental health. This is no longer just a debate—we know that that is the case. They are disrupting our classrooms, driving bullying and exposing pupils to adult content, which is very disturbing. No school that has banned phones has ever reversed that decision. Will the Government now show leadership by supporting a national smartphone

ban? Our headteachers need that support from their Government.

Will the Government also remove unlawful guidance that has confused teachers and undermined sex-based safeguarding, and ensure that relationships, sexual health and parenthood materials are age appropriate and based on consent?

Jenny Gilruth: I did not quite catch the end of the question, but I will be happy to write to the member on that point. I discussed mobile phone guidance in my response to Mr Rennie. We have been very clear as a Government that, should headteachers see fit, they will be supported by the Government to ban mobile phones. Fundamentally, the position that the Government has taken throughout this process is that we trust our teachers to take those decisions, and that is a decision that, at the current time, I stand by.

Urgent Question

14:58

For Women Scotland (Policing)

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I remind members that my wife is a sergeant with Police Scotland.

To ask the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body what discussions it has had with Police Scotland about the policing of the For Women Scotland rally outside the Parliament on 4 September, regarding reports of disruptive behaviour by an individual and a lack of action taken against him by the police.

Claire Baker (Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body): There was an immediate debrief from the Parliament's police unit after the For Women Scotland rally and counter-protest by Cabaret Against the Hate Speech. In the debrief, the Parliament's police unit advised us on the steps that it had taken to manage interaction between the groups. Following a request from For Women Scotland, the Parliament's police unit asked Cabaret Against the Hate Speech to turn down the volume of its music, a request that the police told us was complied with. It is for the police unit to balance the rights of protesters outside the building.

Douglas Ross: I will say from the outset that I am the strongest possible supporter of our police. They do an extremely challenging job in difficult circumstances right across the country, and particularly so here in our Parliament. However, the images and the response last Thursday beg many questions. It looked as though, instead of dealing with the problem, the police assembled a protective cordon around this individual to allow him to disrupt an organised rally that was trying to get a message across to the Government. There was controlling and intimidating behaviour by one individual against those at the rally, and that was facilitated by the police. At the time, Joanna Cherry KC said that Police Scotland

"seem unaware of their positive duty to facilitate our right to protest and speak."

What further work and response does the corporate body expect from Police Scotland? Does Claire Baker agree that there should be a full statement from Chief Constable Jo Farrell, who has been silent on the issue, and that, at the very least, there should be an apology from Police Scotland to For Women Scotland?

Claire Baker: I understand the strong feelings around the issue. The member has outlined his understanding of what happened outside. It is for the police to interpret that behaviour, and the

issues that are raised are better directed to them. The Parliament is responsible for security inside the building. The police make decisions on and have to deal with protests that are outside the building.

It is helpful if organisations let us know when they are having protests. For Women Scotland did that, which was helpful. Once an event starts, if it is taking place outside the building, it is the police's responsibility, and they are the ones who make the decisions.

Douglas Ross: I understand what the member is saying about it being a police responsibility, but she accepted in her opening response that there was a full debrief immediately after. Therefore, the Parliament is involved.

Just today, we had reports of a protest outside Parliament that was interrupted by the constant tooting of a car horn. The driver of that car was told to desist, which they did. Options are available to the police that clearly were not taken last week.

I want to ask about the Parliament's policy on protests and demonstrations. It states that Parliament has the power

"to move the location of your protest to another part of the estate, if asked to do so by a Parliamentary official or member of the Parliament's Police Unit. This would be to avoid obstructing others' use of the estate or if it becomes evident you may be causing a safety risk to yourself or others".

Was there any discussion by the corporate body about using that power last week? Why was it not used? Why was that one individual allowed to continually disrupt a peaceful protest that attracted hundreds of people in support of For Women Scotland?

Claire Baker: The member has referred to our protest policy. Under the protest policy, certain areas of the building are restricted, including the canopy to the building, which is to ensure safe entry in and out of the building. Beyond that, it is the responsibility of the police to carry out policing of the area.

The corporate body meets the police annually, but the security team meets the police several times a month to discuss protest activity and other activities that are relevant to the Parliament.

Again, I emphasise that it is not for the Parliament to direct the police on their decision making. If any criminality has taken place, it must be referred and reported to the police.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): A number of members wish to ask supplementary questions. I want to get them all in, so they will need to be brief.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): The actions of one individual were designed to provoke and disrupt. He was literally trying to drown out the For Women Scotland rally and the voices of women who came to their Parliament. The decibel level of the music played will have breached environmental health standards. I can assure the corporate body that the volume was being turned up, not down.

I ask that the corporate body meet not just Police Scotland but the City of Edinburgh Council, so that protocols can be agreed to prevent a repeat of the antisocial behaviour by that individual.

Claire Baker: The member raises a number of points. I will emphasise again that it is for the police to make decisions on events outside the building.

On the activity that happened last week, the police debrief said that the police made a request for the music to be turned down and that it was complied with. I was not outside the building, so I cannot give a view, but that is the information that we have from the police.

There is always a balance to be struck with regard to events outside Parliament. We are an open, inclusive Parliament and, at times, there will be protest and counter-protest. I understand that there are events outside today where there is protest and counter-protest.

It is not for us to make a judgment on the activities that are being protested about or the issues that are being raised outside. It is for us to have a balance and make sure that people can protest in a peaceful manner.

Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): I attended the For Women Scotland rally that was held outside the Parliament last week. It was a peaceful protest. Unfortunately, it was disrupted by a counter-protester, who does not appear to have got permission to protest outside Holyrood, as everyone else is required to do.

That seemed to be a breach of the Scottish Parliament's rules, yet no action was taken against the protester. The fact that women who were protesting to protect their rights in Scotland appeared to have been treated differently from trans rights activists can give rise to perceptions of bias in the enforcement of the rules. That is an unacceptable situation for the Scottish Parliament to be in. What action have the parliamentary authorities taken to ensure that everyone is being treated equally under the law?

Claire Baker: As I said, our protest policy is in place to ensure that everyone can take part in protests in a safe environment. As I also said, For Women Scotland informed us that it was planning

to come outside the Parliament—we appreciate that, as we appreciate foreknowledge. However, organisations or individuals do not need permission to protest outside the Parliament. It is for the police to decide when someone is making a legitimate protest.

I again say that it is for the police to decide how things are managed outside the building. We will have discussions with the police if we know that protests are happening, and we will advise. For Women Scotland made us aware that an individual was expected to come along to the event who could be challenging to them. We gave that information to the police, and it was up to the police to decide what to do with it.

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Ind): A number of female constituents from Lothian have been in touch to tell me that they felt unsafe and insecure last week because of the behaviour of that one individual. Does the member, on behalf of the corporate body, agree that the behaviour of the individual in question was totally unacceptable and that women should be free to advocate for their rights without fear or abuse?

Claire Baker: There is a balance in ensuring that everybody can advocate for their rights and feelings outside the Parliament. If people feel intimidated or threatened at an event, they should speak to the police officers who are on duty, and they can make a complaint in future if they feel that there was a criminal offence. Unless a criminal offence has been committed, the police are there to ensure that safe protests can take place. We need to balance the rights of everyone who comes to the Parliament.

Ash Regan (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba): I, too, was a speaker outside the Parliament at the For Women Scotland rally last week. I approached the police who were on duty at the time and requested that the volume be reduced so that everyone could be heard. I was told that that was not going to be possible.

At the same time, there were other protests. Members of Mothers Against Genocide were seeking to read out the names of dead babies—a solemn and peaceful act—and they were also being drowned out by the noise that was being created by the counter-protester.

Both of those groups—they were mainly women—were subjected to very dangerous noise levels. We recorded them as being up to 116 decibels. That was from one man with a sound system who was positioned directly between us all. There are questions for the police, although I accept that Claire Baker is not able to answer for them. Why did they permit that proximity? Why did they fail to act when safe limits were being breached? What steps will the corporate body take with the police to ensure that women who are exercising their democratic rights are properly protected in that in the future?

Claire Baker: When we are aware that we will have protests and counter-protests, we have prior discussions with the police. We also request and advise that certain organisations are in different areas of the small space that we have. However, once people are outside, it is for the police to decide. If someone moves somewhere else, unless there is a good reason for that, the police will make a decision on whether they can move that person. It is a police matter.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes this item of business. There will be a brief pause to allow the members on the front benches to change over before we move to the next item of business.

Scotland's Railway (20 Years)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-18763, in the name of Fiona Hyslop, on 20 years of Scotland's railway providing a strong platform for the future.

15:09

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): Scotland's public transport system provides a cleaner and greener alternative to the private car. It is a key enabler of growth and opportunity, and it provides vital links for people to live, learn, earn and socialise.

Scotland's railway is at the forefront of that. The railway supports vital connections between our cities, communities and businesses, and it showcases much of what Scotland has to offer. The railway is an integral part of our nation's economy and wellbeing, and I pay tribute to all the people who work on it.

This year marks 20 years since rail powers were devolved at executive level to the Scottish Government. That was a significant step in devolution and a key milestone that helped us to deliver the success that is Scotland's railway. As the United Kingdom Minister for Rail, Lord Hendy, has said, Scotland's integrated approach, which is underpinned by the alliance between ScotRail and Network Rail, has delivered a more cohesive railway system—one that has been delivered through greater integration of the management of track and train, with the whole system working together.

Today is an important moment to reflect on the achievements that Scotland's railway has delivered on behalf of the people of Scotland. Our focus remains on delivering further improvements to encourage more people to switch from their car and to choose more sustainable journeys. By making rail services more affordable, accessible and inclusive, we are delivering on the core principles of our national transport strategy.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): While the cabinet secretary is talking about improvements, will she give an update on when she plans to give some positive news about the new rail development and railway station at Newburgh? She had a very good visit to Newburgh some months ago, and she was supposed to be receiving advice towards the end of May. We are very keen to hear positive news about the next steps.

Fiona Hyslop: I did, indeed, have a very good visit to Newburgh, where I heard the passion of the community. I have made it clear to my officials that I would like their advice as soon as possible. I understand that the work, which has been supported by Government funding to get it to this stage, is on-going, but I expect to receive the advice fairly soon.

Since 2007, the Government has invested more than £12 billion in rail infrastructure. Our consistent policy of maintaining a rolling programme of electrification has delivered 574km of electrified track, which has enabled greener and more efficient journeys. Over the past 20 years, first the Scottish Executive and now the Scottish Government have funded the construction of 25 new stations and reopened four previously disused lines in order to reconnect communities across Scotland. Those projects improve not just infrastructure but people's lives.

Going back 20 years, I recognise that previous Administrations initiated a number of valued improvements to our railway that we inherited in 2007 and successfully delivered.

The line between Airdrie and Bathgate and the one between Stirling, Dunblane and Alloa have connected communities across the central belt. The Edinburgh to Glasgow improvement programme has delivered not only modern electric trains but the impressive transformation of Haymarket and Glasgow Queen Street stations on that flagship route.

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): You have mentioned lines from east to west, but will you comment on the need for the Almond chord in order to revitalise and bring back to life the lemon of a station that is Edinburgh Gateway, which is largely unused?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Always speak through the chair.

Fiona Hyslop: We recognise the previous work on the EGIP and the recommendations on the Almond chord. Electrification is taking place, particularly between Haymarket and Dalmeny. I saw that in person last Friday when I travelled to Fife to announce electrification in the Fife area.

This week, we celebrate 10 years since the reopening of the Borders railway line, which had been closed for nearly 50 years. The reopening has transformed the economy and attractiveness of the local area and improved lives.

Last year, we opened the Levenmouth rail link, with Leven, Cameron Bridge and their active travel network finally reconnected to Scotland's rail network through direct services to Edinburgh via Kirkcaldy. In May, ScotRail introduced a second train each hour via Dunfermline and the wider Fife network in order to provide additional journey opportunities.

I know that, during the debate, we will hear ambitious calls for more stations—as we already have done—and for more lines. I doubt that I will be able to address them all in my closing speech, but I will try.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): Will the cabinet secretary take an intervention?

Fiona Hyslop: I want to move on just now.

It has now been three years since the Scottish Government took the decision to end the Abellio ScotRail franchise, and it has been two years since the Serco Caledonian Sleeper franchise ended. Both operators are now in public ownership and under the direction of Scottish Rail Holdings.

We have seen continued improvements as a result of public ownership. ScotRail has added more than 200 additional services each weekday in the past year, offering 7 per cent more seats. ScotRail has a proven track record in boosting patronage, with journeys in the financial year 2024-25 at 84.7 million, up from 63.7 million in 2022-23 and 81.1 million in 2023-24. That is a huge increase of 33 per cent over two years, and a healthy increase of 4 per cent between 2023-24 and 2024-25.

On average, ScotRail remains one of the highest-scoring operators for overall passenger satisfaction. It employs 900 more people than it did prior to public ownership and, for the fifth year in a row, it has been awarded top employer status. I congratulate all ScotRail staff on their hard work and dedication.

Under public ownership, Caledonian sleeper performance has improved. Right-time arrivals are at almost 88 per cent, which is well above the average for the rest of the UK. Sleeper passenger numbers continue to grow year on year—it is one of the strongest post-pandemic recoveries of all Great Britain operators.

The UK Government is preparing to legislate on rail reform. The Scottish Government believes that a fully devolved and integrated railway that is publicly controlled, operated in the service of the public and truly accountable to the public will deliver better and more efficient services for our people, our communities and our visitors. In the absence of full devolution, I have made it clear to the UK Government that Scotland must benefit from rail reform to the same extent as England and Wales. I have welcomed assurances on that from the UK Minister for Rail, Lord Hendy, but I have yet to see whether and how that will be secured in law.

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (LD): If the cabinet secretary has time, I will briefly intervene and say that, with devolution comes fiscal responsibility. The cost of upgrading the tracks and of Network Rail's operations is huge. Where will the Government find the money if it wants to take over that responsibility?

Fiona Hyslop: We already fund Network Rail's responsibilities with £1.5 billion as part of control period 7. That is already part of our budget. The issue with rail reform is that we have to ensure that we have control not only of the funding but of the decision making. My concern about the rail reform that is being discussed at the UK level is that that vertical integration might preclude the governance arrangements that we already have. I have therefore made it clear in meetings with the UK Government that Scottish ministers will not accept any diminution of our existing devolved powers over rail, and that strong governance, accountability and assurance measures must be in place for the areas in which we set strategy and that we fund and specify. That is why a collective stance from the Parliament stating that is important at this time.

I move on to the economy. We know that rail benefits business and that growth through rail freight and the transport of goods by rail is a key lever in driving down transport emissions. The Government's role is to put policies in place that facilitate modal shift, and we have shown genuine leadership with a tangible focus in that area through our first-of-a-kind freight growth targets, which incentivise Network Rail to collaborate with the industry to grow rail freight. However, freight works on a commercial basis, so there is a key role for the industry to play.

In these times of constrained budgets, I am proud of our investment in projects that support rail freight and pleased to have secured a rail freight grant in this year's budget. As we work with the rail industry to plan the next suite of investment projects, we will continue to ensure that the benefit for freight is maximised.

Paul Sweeney: Does the cabinet secretary also recognise the importance of rail and rolling stock maintenance in Scotland? In particular, does she welcome the reopening by Gibson's engineering of the Caley railway works in Springburn after a six-year hiatus, in the hope that it will succeed in getting more contracts after the recent award of the Transport for London contract?

Fiona Hyslop: I welcome that. Part of rail's role in the economy is to help the supply chain, and it is important that the jobs and the welcome, continued investment from the Scottish Government help to support that supply chain.

Despite our well-known financial challenges, this year the Scottish Government will invest more than £1.5 billion in ScotRail and sleeper services and in operating, maintaining and renewing the rail

network. Although transport is a significant contributor to greenhouse gas emissions, Scotland's railway is a success story: whether diesel or electric traction, it is already a low-carbon form of transport for passengers and freight. Scotland's railway will make a significant contribution to the Scottish Government's wider net zero commitments, which we will set out in the draft climate change plan that we put before Parliament.

Looking forward, we continue to invest to modernise Scotland's railway. More than 75 per cent of passenger journeys are already made on electric traction. Building on our record of delivery of electrification, from last year, railway passengers enjoyed new electric services on the Glasgow to Barrhead line, which was completed in December 2023.

This year, we are delivering works to electrify the railway line between Dalmeny and Haymarket, and we are completing the £144 million East Kilbride enhancement project. Just last week, funding was announced to electrify key routes on the Fife and Borders lines, delivering modern, reliable trains. Those infrastructure enhancements are enabling works that will allow a new zero-emission fleet to be introduced. In the autumn, we will publish our refresh of the rail decarbonisation action plan, which will set out a credible plan to deliver decarbonisation in a proportionate way that achieves best value.

Scotland's railway must capitalise on its existing skills and identify and create opportunities to upskill the current workforce, retraining individuals from other sectors and investing time in the future workforce, thus future proofing Scotland's railway. The rail cluster builder is a specific example of the Scottish Government's support of the rail industry. Funded by Scottish Enterprise, Transport Scotland and Skills Development Scotland, the rail cluster is a three-year project connecting more Scottish small and medium-sized enterprises with rail sector organisations, strengthening and deepening relationships with key stakeholders across the sector and helping to create innovative green solutions that will support our net zero targets.

ScotRail has an ageing fleet of trains that must be replaced over the coming decade. A procurement exercise to replace ScotRail's intercity high-speed train fleet is already under way. Last month, we formally started market engagement with train manufacturers on the suburban train fleet. Those trains will enable level boarding, they will be more energy efficient, helping to reduce emissions and operating costs, and they will better meet modern passenger expectations.

We want more people to choose to travel by public transport for work, study and leisure, and that is why ScotRail peak fares have gone for good, which will help people with on-going household bills and costs. Existing rail passengers will save money, and the measure will encourage potential new passengers on to the train, leaving the car at home. Permanently removing ScotRail peak fares makes public transport a more affordable option for many. It also makes ticketing simpler and more straightforward, supporting our ambitions to simplify ticketing across our transport network.

I have made clear the importance of Scotland's railway to our economy and society. I have made clear the commitment that the Scottish Government has made over many years to deliver a wide range of achievements that make a real difference to people's lives. Moving forward, our commitment to rail remains as strong. As we mark 20 years of devolution in Scotland's railway, I commend the motion to the Parliament.

I move,

That the Parliament recognises that it is now 20 years since the devolution of executive powers over rail funding, specification and strategy for Scotland's railway; celebrates the 15th anniversary of the completion of the Airdrie-Bathgate route, instigated by the Labour and Liberal Democrat coalition and completed under the Scottish National Party, the 10th anniversary of the reopening of the Borders Railway and the first anniversary of the reopening of the Levenmouth route; recognises the many significant achievements over those 20 years, including electrification of over 570 kilometres of track, the opening of 30 new stations, and an increase of a fifth in ScotRail passenger numbers; welcomes the consistent delivery of operational performance and passenger satisfaction under public ownership and control, which are among the best levels in Britain; notes the need to continue to improve those performance levels; welcomes the investment of £13 billion over this period to sustain and grow the network through value-for-money projects, including the complete renewal of the Caledonian Sleeper fleet and operation; notes the cross-party support for the removal, for good, of ScotRail peak fares, first piloted while Scottish Green Party ministers were part of the Scottish Government; looks forward to the benefits from developments such as the completion of the electrification of the East Kilbride route, and the progression of procurement of new train fleets and further electrification, including the recently announced Fife and Borders routes; recognises that the UK Government's current proposals for rail reform draw heavily on the widely recognised success of the devolved approach to rail in Scotland; notes the Scottish Government's position that full devolution of rail is the optimal position but, in the absence of full devolution, Scotland's railway must benefit at least as much from those reforms as is promised for England and Wales, and agrees that any reforms that would diminish the Scottish Ministers' powers and the role of the Scottish Parliament already constrained by current UK legislation would be unacceptable to the Scottish Parliament, given the success the delivery model in Scotland has produced over the last two decades.

15:22

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): I think that we can all agree on the importance of rail to the

Scottish economy and Scottish business, such as in the transportation of whisky and fresh produce, as well as on the importance of rail to the future decarbonisation of transport. Rail also plays a key role in Scotland's social development. Our railways have long been a backbone of our communities, linking people to work, education and leisure while offering a critical environmental alternative to car travel.

Rather than simply celebrating past achievements, however, the Scottish Conservative amendment calls for a forward-looking strategy that will ensure that the needs of the public and the wider economy are met.

It is vital that the Scottish Government ensures that value for money and passenger satisfaction remain at the forefront of railway delivery in Scotland. The Scottish National Party promised an improved ScotRail when it nationalised the rail service more than three years ago, yet, under the SNP, public transport has become unreliable and far too expensive. Ticket prices and the number of complaints have soared, while the number of services and the number of passengers have plummeted. Indeed, there is not a single mention in the Scottish Government motion of the stark fact that our rail services have never quite got back to offering anything like the same level of service that they offered pre-Covid.

Fiona Hyslop: Will the member give way?

Sue Webber: Not at the moment.

That fact is one of the reasons why so many people are reluctant to get back to office working, and that decision has a direct correlation with the recovery of town and city centre economies.

The SNP's decision to reintroduce peak fares across ScotRail trains last year was a disastrous decision, which served to punish hard-working Scots, especially those businesses and employees who were just considering returning to work to kick-start their business performance and increase productivity. We campaigned against that. Despite being defeated on a Scottish Conservative motion on the issue last year—a year ago almost to the day—the SNP refused to budge. Its members claimed at the time that abolishing peak fares permanently was unaffordable.

Perhaps I am far too cynical, but the timing of the U-turn did not really come as a surprise to me. The Government was desperate for a good news story and desperate to take full credit—we have seen that modus operandi before from the SNP. However, I am thrilled with the SNP's latest U-turn, which is long overdue. The Scottish Conservatives have always said that we would permanently scrap peak rail fares to ease the burden on hard-working Scots.

Today's debate is also about improving rail connections throughout Scotland. That is not just about the regional benefits—it is a national priority. We need to enhance the infrastructure to not only foster local community cohesion but bolster the entire country's transport network. Passengers have been let down by SNP mismanagement. It is common sense to link new railway developments to future centres of population growth, and the SNP Government must outline how it plans to link the railway with growing towns and villages across the country.

Fiona Hyslop: I note the terms of the Conservative amendment. Does Sue Webber recognise that, if what her amendment sets out had been the policy in the past, it would have prevented the Borders railway, which, in fact, was introduced because of a declining population? Indeed, the terms of her amendment might undermine those people who are campaigning for the extension of the Borders railway.

Sue Webber: This is part and parcel of today's debate. The motion that the SNP has lodged looks back. I want to look forward to the future.

Winchburgh is a perfect example of a place that would benefit from a train station; I have been pushing for that in this Parliament for some years now. Winchburgh is a vibrant and growing community in West Lothian, and it desperately needs to be connected to the rail network. The establishment of a new railway station would enhance connectivity, ease traffic congestion in West Lothian and the west of Edinburgh, and support our ambitions to provide sustainable transport solutions. There will be 4,000 new families living there, and they will need that connection.

A new station in Winchburgh is essential. It is not only a necessity to alleviate mounting congestion but critical for the Scottish Government to meet its failing net zero ambitions. That is also true of investment in the Almond chord line, because, if investment was made there, it would make Edinburgh Gateway station, in which £41 million was invested, look like less of a white elephant. The Almond chord line would connect services from Fife to the west of Scotland and, with all the new houses that are being built in west Edinburgh, I know that commuters are crying out for that to be considered.

However, there is no future plan today. In the debate, we are celebrating stations that have come into service, but there is no detail on what stations will come in the future. The Blindwells development in East Lothian will result in 10,000 new homes, but, despite the east coast main line running through that stretch of what is an ever-expanding commuter area, there is only one train per hour. The homes are being touted as

commutable to Edinburgh, but it seems that going by car will be far more preferable to taking the train. Residents are buying homes there because they are in easy reach of Edinburgh for social and leisure activities, but they will have to drive. We need to help those people to make the decision to use public transport.

The Scottish Government motion makes no mention at all of new rail building for those vital new communities and homes. Instead, there are dire warnings about threats to the Scottish ministers' powers. When she closes the debate, perhaps the cabinet secretary might outline what will be done to accelerate badly needed investment in our rail infrastructure, instead of displaying the customary foot dragging that slows up so many practical and cost-effective schemes such as Winchburgh and the Almond chord.

We need investment in the train fleet, which is ageing, and our assets, which are in need of renewal. The future development of our railway is currently hindered by its ageing 19th century infrastructure—we cannot hide from that; it is a fact—and the ageing ScotRail fleet. Joanne Maguire, the director of ScotRail, has said:

"We have got another challenge with ageing—that's our fleet. We have one of the oldest fleets in Britain."

On key intercity routes, the reliability of the InterCity 125 fleet has been a persistent disappointment and has led to overcrowding and service disruptions. Rural lines face equally significant challenges. Iconic routes such as the west Highland and far north lines remain plagued by outdated infrastructure and limited amenities, despite our scenic railways holding immense untapped potential.

The Scottish Government is committed to spending in excess of £6 billion on new road capacity on corridors from Perth and Aberdeen to Inverness, yet no similar ambition exists for parallel rail routes. The Highland main line has been left with infrastructure that the Victorians would recognise, while an Aberdeen city deal promise that £200 million would be spent on faster line speeds north of Dundee has been reneged on.

It is vital that the SNP outlines how it plans to future proof the rail network. We have heard about the importance of the supply chain from organisations that are concerned about boom and bust in the investment cycles. The sector faces real uncertainty due to the boom and bust that is part of the cyclical nature of rail infrastructure spending. Businesses want to see a consistent long-term plan so that they can invest in this country, but, as I said, instability hinders long-term planning and discourages new talent from entering the industry.

I have also heard that skills shortages are an issue and that workforce retention is challenging. A notable portion of the rail workforce—9.4 per cent in the past year alone, especially from supplier firms—has exited the industry, and that is causing a critical loss of expertise. Without a steady pipeline of projects, companies struggle to invest in the staff recruitment and training that are needed.

In her opening remarks, the cabinet secretary mentioned the crucial nature of growth in rail freight. That is a strategic priority, but rail faces challenges with cost competitiveness when compared with road transport, especially following the abolition of a key freight support grant for 2024-25. Capacity constraints on critical cross-border and internal routes are hampering growth in rail freight.

There are also challenges with asset renewal. In addition to the cost of the trains themselves, there is significant inflation to contend with, and the supply chain disruptions are challenging.

I have just clocked the time, so I will conclude. We must focus on putting passengers first, cutting waste in bloated quangos, tightening spending rules and focusing every penny on delivering a safe, reliable and modern railway that delivers value for money for taxpayers, commuters, businesses and our economy.

I move amendment S6M-18763.1, to leave out from first "welcomes" to end and insert:

"urges the Scottish Government to ensure that value-for-money and passenger satisfaction remain at the forefront of railway delivery in Scotland; notes that the cross-party support for the removal of peak rail fares was made possible thanks to a Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party motion that called on the Scottish Government to remove them; recognises the importance of rail to the Scottish economy and business, such as in the transportation of whisky and fresh produce, and agrees that rail is important to the future decarbonisation of transport; notes that new railway developments should be linked to future centres of population growth, such as at Winchburgh, and calls on the Scottish Government to outline how it plans to deliver upgraded rail links in existing towns and villages, and connect those that do not have a rail link; recognises that future development of the railway in Scotland is hindered by aging 19th century infrastructure; calls on the Scottish Government to outline how it plans to future-proof the rail network, and urges the Scottish and UK governments to outline how they will work together to deliver private investment in the rail network."

15:31

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I am pleased to open the debate for Scottish Labour as we mark 20 years since the devolution of rail powers and recognise the progress that has been made on Scotland's railways.

The motion highlights some achievements during that time, including the reopening of the Levenmouth rail line, a cause that has been close to my own heart since 2008. That reopening was the result of the perseverance of a tenacious group of campaigners, alongside strong cross-party support, and is an example of what can be achieved when communities and campaigners work together.

However, we must also acknowledge that it should not take decades of pressure to deliver essential transport connections. Communities in other parts of Scotland are still waiting for investment and deserve clarity about when promised projects will actually be delivered.

As we reflect on progress, we must also be honest about the challenges that our rail network faces and the work that must still be done. Although we may accept that the coming together of the rail bodies involved in Scotland's railway has been a success, the running of our railways by the Scottish Government has not maximised the potential that exists, so we must focus on improving that.

One of the most significant developments in recent years is the return of ScotRail to public ownership, a policy that Scottish Labour had long called for. Public ownership provides the opportunity to have greater accountability and a service that puts passengers and workers ahead of profit, but it must deliver better reliability, affordability and accessibility. It must mean that passengers see a difference in the quality of service and that staff feel supported and safe at work.

The motion refers to a one-fifth increase in ScotRail passenger numbers, but we know that passenger numbers are still 20 per cent lower than before the pandemic. One of the first actions after the Scottish Government took control of ScotRail was a cut to services, rather than an investment in stimulating demand that would have aligned with the aims of reducing car use and transport emissions. The motion also highlights

"operational performance and passenger satisfaction under public ownership and control"

but millions of pounds have been paid out in compensation under the delay repay scheme since nationalisation, and punctuality and reliability are the most common topics of complaint. Addressing those issues is core to improving the commuter experience.

Fiona Hyslop: Will the member give way?

Claire Baker: I will, briefly.

Fiona Hyslop: Does the member acknowledge that Covid caused disruption for all rail operators, but that ScotRail is one of the fastest-growing operators with regard to passenger numbers and satisfaction rates, which went up to 90 per cent in the latest survey? Some cancellations are caused by network issues, but those affect a tiny percentage of the overall number of journeys. There are more improvements to be made, but does the member recognise the improvements of the past few years?

Claire Baker: I started my speech by saying that I recognise the successes, that I believe that taking ScotRail into public ownership was the right thing to do and that it has been a success. However, more could be done. From speaking to constituents in my region, I know that those figures do not reflect their experience of using the train. If I were to have a discussion with them about the Government's very positive spin on what is happening, they would say that that is not their daily experience. The cabinet secretary is familiar with the Fife circle. What I am saying might be particular to Fife, but what has been said is not the daily experience of my constituents.

Scottish Labour welcomed the permanent removal of peak fares, but let us be clear that that happened only after significant pressure from trade unions and Opposition parties. Just last week, many of us spoke in the members' business debate on the subject. I have to say that I enjoyed quoting some of the Scottish Government's shifting reasons for ending the pilot. However, behind that, there are serious questions about the policy intention. Is the permanent removal of peak fares, as the First Minister said, about the cost of living and a policy that the Scottish Government is prepared to finance in the long term to deliver savings for passengers, or is it about achieving modal shift and increasing passenger numbers so that the policy will ultimately pay for itself? If it is the latter, how will the Government achieve that and within what timescales, given that that was its stated reason for the failure of the pilot?

We should also note that not all passengers will be better off. Those who relied on super off-peak tickets might now pay more, and, although flexipasses remain, the percentage savings have fallen. There is scope for a fairer, smarter approach to ticketing that reflects post-pandemic travel patterns and addresses regional price disparities that penalise some commuters. Alongside my colleagues, I have consistently pressed the Scottish Government to address unfair ticket prices and poor service reliability, both of which have discouraged people from choosing rail. If we are serious about tackling the climate emergency and reducing congestion on our roads, we need a rail network that people can afford to use and rely on. Encouraging more people to travel by train supports our local economies, reduces emissions and helps to create more

vibrant town centres by making it easier for people to travel for work and leisure.

As I have already mentioned, the cabinet secretary is well aware of the persistent problems in relation to reliability and overcrowding for rail passengers in my region of Mid Scotland and Fife. A recurring problem is the short-forming of trains on peak-time services to plug gaps elsewhere, which leaves Fife travellers in packed carriages or unable to board at all. I welcome confirmation of electrification work on parts of the Fife and Borders routes, but there needs to be a degree of honesty about what that will mean for passengers. Many stations will see little change for years. Improvements in reliability and capacity cannot wait until the end of electrification projects. When it comes to short-forming in particular, I urge the Scottish Government to explore more consistent and public tracking of that in addition to the existing public performance measure statistics, as a basis for working swiftly to reduce short-forming as far as possible and to help to build passenger confidence.

The Labour amendment urges a focus on service improvement alongside passenger experience and worker safety. Across our public transport, we need to ensure that passengers and staff are safe in their work and travel and that they are protected from violence and abuse. Changes in ticket office hours have meant fewer visible staff around some stations, and we must ensure that that does not mean that people—particularly women and girls—feel less safe when travelling.

Finally, there have been assurances that the UK Government's plan for rail reform will not affect Scottish powers, and we should take those assurances seriously. Improvements to cross-border services will benefit Scotland, and the Scottish Government's focus should be on providing the best service for passengers.

As we mark 20 years of devolved rail powers, we should celebrate achievements, but we must not be complacent. The real test of Scotland's railways is in the daily experience of passengers and workers. That is why we should focus on driving up punctuality and reliability; delivering modal shift by making rail affordable, reliable and accessible; protecting workers from violence and abuse; and ensuring that public ownership works for the public by delivering a service that people can trust.

I move amendment S6M-18763.3, to leave out from "that the UK Government's" to end and insert:

"the benefits of public ownership and welcomes proposals from the UK Government for the rest of the UK, including cross-border travel into Scotland; notes the repeated assurances from the UK Government that its plans on rail reform would not affect Scottish Government powers; welcomes the permanent removal of peak fares but notes that it only came about after significant pressure on the Scottish Government; acknowledges that ScotRail passenger numbers are still nearly 20% lower than pre-COVID-19-pandemic levels; recognises that, with punctuality and reliability being the highest complaint topics to ScotRail, more must be done to improve the service, including addressing overcrowding and short-forming, in order to achieve modal shift and attract passengers back to the railways, and acknowledges the importance of protections against violence and abuse for ScotRail workers."

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Ms Baker. I advise the chamber that we have exhausted all the time in hand that we had. I call Mark Ruskell.

15:38

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): I thank the Scottish Government for giving us the opportunity to acknowledge the progress that has been made in the devolution era to restore our railways and to run them in the public interest. It is a timely debate, coming just one week after peak fares were finally scrapped for good.

The debate is also an opportunity to look forward to the kind of railway that everybody in Scotland wants and can feel proud of: one that is genuinely affordable, safe and accessible, low carbon and pollution free; that provides a reliable service that is welcoming and comfortable; and that reaches many of the communities that were abandoned after the Beeching cuts and need to be connected once again.

There is much to be said about our railways, but I will start where we left off last week. The scrapping of peak fares is what people want. They do not want complex, overpriced ticketing whereby they have to sprint to the ticket barriers to get the last off-peak train.

The days of making rail exclusive and only for the few are coming to an end, but we need to go further. Research from the Scottish Greens shows that the vast majority of ScotRail's first-class capacity goes unused. Last year, 98 per cent of first-class tickets were unsold.

Our railways should be for all of us. Every journey on a ScotRail service should be a first-class experience. It should not be determined by our ability to pay extra. We have all been in the situation of struggling to find seats or being forced to stand in cramped carriages while the first-class carriage is almost completely empty. Anyone who has got on a busy commuter train from Glasgow to Edinburgh during the festivals in August knows that that can be particularly uncomfortable in the heat and can lead to people feeling unwell. Rail companies across the UK are reducing their first-class services, and it is time for ScotRail to do the

same. If we are to have a rail renaissance in Scotland, we need low-cost, reliable and accessible rail.

Fiona Hyslop: Is the member aware that ScotRail has already declassified its first-class carriages on most commuter routes? For example, services between Dunblane and Edinburgh Waverley, Alloa and Glasgow Queen Street, and Edinburgh Waverley and Glasgow Central via Shotts, and in Fife and the Borders, all operate with trains that have first-class seats but no first-class fares, meaning that any customer is free to sit there. Perhaps, as I have done in the past, the member would encourage people to use those empty seats.

Mark Ruskell: I am very much aware of that, because I regularly sit in such seats when I travel from Stirling. However, the reality is that, on some of the busiest routes, we still have a nonsensical first class. It is time to look at that again.

An affordable, quality rail service is of use only if people have a station at which to board the train. Many stations that were abandoned in the Beeching era are gone and are not coming back; however, there are still other places within the reach of Scotland's rail network that would benefit from being reconnected.

For example, in Newburgh, where I was very pleased to join the cabinet secretary on a recent cross-party visit, which I helped the community to host, people have for decades seen train after train go past on the way to Perth and Edinburgh. Children at the local school who dreamed of the railway coming back have now grown up. However, the town is set for major housing growth and the community has its sights set on exciting new opportunities, including the use of the railway and the River Tay together for new ecotourism business. There is a slot in the current railway timetable for a Newburgh rail halt with a low-cost modular station, and that outlay could be recouped easily through increased passenger numbers.

However, Newburgh is not alone, and the demand for more stations is growing. I have been pleased to support four rail campaigns in Fife over the years. One of those—Levenmouth—has now been built; Newburgh is, I hope, on the cusp of a positive decision; and the St Andrews and Dunfermline to Alloa project is waiting for the right moment to progress. Across Scotland, from the north-east to the Borders, communities are developing business cases for new stations. They are building the vision of Scotland's railways from the bottom up, and they need our support.

Listening to the workers who run our railways is just as important as listening to the communities that they serve. The Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen's most recent report into the financing of rolling stock reminds us that the job of nationalisation and delivery of a people's railway is not yet complete. Around a quarter of the cost of every rail ticket goes to servicing rolling stock companies that pay dividends to private shareholders. By issuing Government bonds tied to the investment of proceeds back into rail services, Governments could create a virtuous cycle of investment and reinvestment in a public rail service that we all value and want to grow and develop. ASLEF believes that moving to a public financing model could make 40 per cent savings on rolling stock costs. That is the approach that most of the rest of the world uses to procure new trains.

It is clear that the privatised model has been disastrous. Levels of investment have been far lower than expected, and additional private financial initiatives have been needed to top up investment. Perverse incentives to scrap new electric trains while running older diesel fleets into the ground have been created across the UK. All the while, money is leaking out of the system to foreign owners, while we worry about whether the Scottish Government can justify the relatively small sums to help ScotRail to scrap peak rail fares.

We should be proud of ScotRail, but we should also be listening to passengers, communities and unions about their vision for the next 20 years: a people's railway for everyone.

15:44

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (LD): I was rather surprised when I saw that the Scottish Government had pencilled in a debate on railways in Government time. It is about time. Over the years, we have had many a debate about Scotland's railway.

It is really good to see the Government actively promoting its own U-turns. When it comes to the removal of peak fares, a little bit of honesty would be much appreciated. The Government ended the pilot scheme by claiming that it was unaffordable. Just over a year ago, the cabinet secretary wrote that

"this level of subsidy cannot continue in the current financial climate".

I get that. In fact, I distinctly remember the cabinet secretary appearing before the Public Audit Committee and defending the reinstatement of peak fares. At that time, she told us that,

"since the pilot ended, rail use has increased"—[*Public Audit Committee, Official Report*, 23 April 2025; c 10.],

as though that were some sort of rationale for the removal of what had been regarded as a subsidy. That was in April, just five months ago. The

Government then said that it would consider removing peak fares

"should UK budget allocations improve in future years".

Therefore, I am over the moon that the Scottish Government finds itself in an improved financial position and is able to remove peak fares. However, the problem is that they should never have been taken away in the first place—then brought back, and then taken away again.

The economics of the situation point to one reality. The price of train tickets has gone down, which is welcome, and I believe that there is cross-party support for that. However, the cost of operating those services presumably has not come down. Therefore, I must ask: where else in the transport budget has the money to reduce peak fares come from?

It seems counterintuitive that the Scottish Government had a target to reduce car usage by 20 per cent by 2030—a target that it has dropped, I should add—but at the same time made train tickets more expensive. That target was important to the Scottish Government, because it was important to its other goal of cutting our greenhouse gas emissions by three quarters by 2030. That has been dropped, too.

I mention those climate targets for one reason. The Scottish Government had a third target, which was the decarbonisation of all passenger trains by 2035. That has been pushed back by a decade as well. We are still waiting for the refreshed rail decarbonisation action plan, which was supposed to be published in the spring of this year. We are now in September, and we have still to see it—yet here we are, having a debate about the future of Scotland's rail. I mention that because I think that a rail decarbonisation plan cannot sit in a silo; it must be part of a wider transport decarbonisation strategy and a wider energy strategy.

Why is that? If there is a central Government strategy, it will do two things. First, it will create economies of scale when it comes to infrastructure investment in new green technology. Secondly, it will unlock private investment.

We have heard a little bit about the role that the private sector plays in this new, so-called "publicly owned" rail service. However, the reality is that it is the private sector that manufactures the rolling stock; it is the private sector that supplies the financing and leasing funding arrangements to the Government for pretty much all of its rolling stock; it is the private sector that does the maintenance on the rolling stock and the mid-life overhauls. Therefore, if there is a strategy on things such as hydrogen or battery storage, part and parcel of that should be a strategy for the whole transport sector, which could unlock investment in those technologies.

I agree that we should be celebrating 20 years of devolution of powers on railways. I have no ideological opposition to the way in which the model currently works. We all know the issues that the last operator had. However, as other members have pointed out, there were 17,000 ScotRail cancellations last year. Passenger journey numbers are still lower than before the Covid pandemic and, indeed, they are lower than pre-nationalisation levels. According to the Office of Rail and Road, Scotland was one of only two train operators across the whole of the UK to operate fewer trains in 2024 than it did in 2023.

The cost of this nationalisation must also be talked about. It is not a negative to point out that, according to *The Herald*, that cost has been £1.47 billion, which represents a rise of 60 per cent from the two years when Abellio operated the franchise.

Fiona Hyslop: Will the member take an intervention?

Jamie Greene: I do not have much time, unfortunately.

Abellio posted a £65 million loss in the year just before the Covid pandemic, and we all know that Serco lost nearly £70 million over its seven years of operating the service. Is the publicly owned model any more profitable than when the franchise was in private hands? Is the Caledonian sleeper any more profitable than when the service was in private hands?

Fiona Hyslop: Would the member allow me to answer?

Jamie Greene: Will I get my time back, Presiding Officer? I am keen to hear an answer.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: No.

Jamie Greene: Perhaps the cabinet secretary could write to me instead.

There is a lot of good will in the chamber, because we all want to see ScotRail succeed. However, I want to see the decarbonisation strategy being developed, and local anecdotal reliability and punctuality issues being addressed, because people are still not happy about certain aspects of the system. For those reasons, I will support the Government's motion, but I will also support the Conservative Party and Labour Party amendments. We should all be proud of Scotland's railway, but it needs to be fit for the future.

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

15:50

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): I welcome the chance to speak in support

of the motion, which marks a significant milestone in Scotland's transport history. Twenty years ago, the devolution of executive powers over rail funding, specification and strategy gave Scotland some of the tools to shape its own railway. Today, we celebrate not only that landmark decision but the tangible progress that has been made.

Over the past two decades, Scotland's railway has undergone a transformation, some of which we have heard about today. We have seen the electrification of more than 570km of track, the opening of 30 new stations and a 20 per cent increase in ScotRail passenger numbers. Those achievements are not only technical or operational; they represent a commitment to connectivity, sustainability and public service. In my Greenock and Inverclyde constituency, the benefits of rail investment are clear and deeply felt. That is not to say that there are no challenges, because there clearly are, but there have been benefits over that 20-year period.

Inverclyde has the highest number of train stations per head of population of any local authority area in Scotland. It has 13 stations—14 if I count IBM Halt station, which is currently mothballed—which serve communities across the Gourock and Wemyss Bay lines. Those lines are vital arterial links for the constituency, as well as places outside Inverclyde. They support everything from daily commuting to tourism and leisure. Stations such as Wemyss Bay, which is regularly recognised as one of the UK's finest, are not only functional but iconic. Gourock station, which has been redeveloped over the past 15 years, now offers a modern, welcoming gateway to the town. The development had been a long-running saga, but the SNP Government managed to unblock the logjam to make it happen.

The new pedestrian crossing and lift at Port Glasgow station, which make it fully accessible for disabled passengers, are a testament to inclusive infrastructure. I pay tribute to my late council colleague Councillor Jim MacLeod, who tirelessly drove the campaign and helped secure the investment. His legacy is one of determination and service to the community.

Over the past 20 years, we have also seen the class 314 trains replaced following the introduction of the class 385 trains.

The scrapping of peak rail fares is not only impactful but practical. It puts money back into my constituents' pockets and makes rail travel more accessible and equitable. I will share some examples from Inverclyde: a journey from Wemyss Bay to Glasgow Central has dropped from £16.50 to £10.40, which is a saving of £6.10 or 37 per cent; from Gourock to Glasgow Central, the fare has dropped from £15.60 to £9.90, which is a saving of £5.70 or 36.5 per cent; a journey from Greenock Central to Glasgow now costs £9.10 instead of £14, which is a 35 per cent reduction; and from Port Glasgow, our busiest station, to Glasgow, the fare has gone down from £12.60 to £8.50, which is a saving of £4.10 or 32.5 per cent. For a daily commuter from Gourock, that could mean an annual saving of nearly £1,200, which is a substantial benefit, especially in a cost of living crisis, as part of the SNP Government's cost of living guarantee.

However, having so many stations brings some challenges. The network's open nature has led to antisocial behaviour issues, in the warmer months in particular, when youths travel to Inverclyde and Wemyss Bay to access the waterfront. I welcome the introduction of ScotRail's travel safe teams on the Inverclyde lines, because their presence has helped to reduce incidents. However, it has not eliminated the incidents, and the teams need more assistance. I commend the British Transport Police for its continued efforts on the same issues. Its work is essential and deserves our full support, but it also needs more assistance.

Although ScotRail has made great strides, it faces many long-standing issues. That is why I believe that it is time for Network Rail's responsibilities to be devolved to the Scottish Parliament. Having one organisation responsible for both infrastructure and operations would allow for better co-ordination, faster decision making and more accountability. It would remove unnecessary barriers and enable a truly integrated approach to rail delivery in Scotland.

We have already seen the benefits of devolution. Scotland's railway has consistently delivered strong operational performance and high passenger satisfaction—among the best in these islands. The investment of £12 billion, to which the cabinet secretary referred earlier, over the past 20 years has sustained and grown the network through value-for-money projects including the complete renewal of the Caledonian sleeper fleet and the electrification of key routes.

I also welcome the progression of the new train fleet procurement, which will modernise the rolling stock and improve the passenger experience. The UK Government's current proposals for rail reform draw heavily on the success of Scotland's devolved model, which represents a recognition of what this Government has achieved.

Paul Sweeney: Will the member give way on that point?

Stuart McMillan: I am sorry, but I do not have time.

However, I make it clear that any reforms that would diminish the powers of Scottish ministers or the role of this Parliament would be unacceptable. Scotland's railway must benefit at least as much

from those reforms as is promised for England and Wales.

In closing, I praise the Scottish Government for its bold and visionary decisions: taking the ScotRail franchise into public hands, investing in new rolling stock and removing peak fares. Those actions reflect the commitment to a railway that serves the people, not profit, and which is inclusive, sustainable and accountable. I want that journey to continue, and I want to ensure that Scotland's railway remains a source of pride, progress and possibility for generations to come.

15:56

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): I must admit that I enjoy taking part in a rail debate—I feel that I am a bit of a rail geek. I love the whole nostalgia of the railway, the history and the engines. My earliest memory of being on a train is as a young lad of about seven or eight years old. We had special tickets to go on the brand-new InterCity 125, which was going from Aberdeen to Aviemore. It was a special day trip to mark those new trains coming into service, and we got tickets only because one of our neighbours was a train driver—I felt really lucky.

Little did I know, however, that nearly 50 years later, those trains would still be in service in places such as Mexico, Nigeria and Scotland. The SNP espouses the value of net zero, yet it shamefully allows the situation in which we rely on those gas-guzzling hand-me-downs to connect our cities.

I was on one of those 50-year-old trains recently, with Russell Findlay. The sockets did not work—we mentioned it to the person on board, and he said, "Well, most of them don't." I do not think that the catering section on those trains has ever been open; it just takes up space. The trolley service was still offering the same old tired selection and the wifi was unusable.

If the SNP Government thinks that it is operating a world-class rail service, it is completely deluded. We are miles behind other developed countries.

Mark Ruskell: Would the member reflect on the fact that that has been a failure of the privatisation of the rolling-stock companies? They have kept trains running for far longer than they should have done—those trains should have been scrapped far earlier and replaced with a modern fleet.

Douglas Lumsden: Mark Ruskell needs to remember when those InterCity trains were taken back up to Scotland to run for ScotRail—it was only about six years ago. We are miles behind other developed countries when it comes to intercity services, but I guess I should be thankful that my train was actually running.

During recess, I attended a convention in Inverness that was organised by community groups that were angry at the impact of major energy infrastructure. I got on the 6 pm train to get me back to Aberdeen, only for it to be cancelled because the air conditioning was not working. Simply opening the windows was not a good enough solution, and we were all told to wait for three and a half hours for the next train. There was no bus replacement service and no option to get on the warm train—we were just told to wait.

Outwith the central belt, our rolling stock is an embarrassment—something that the Government's motion fails to acknowledge. The motion attempts to paint a rosy picture of rail services in Scotland, while the reality is that, in many parts of our country, the service falls way short of what is expected in a modern country and, in some parts, it is simply non-existent.

It could be far better—even the SNP knows that. Back in 2016, a few months before the Scottish Parliament elections, the SNP committed to spending £200 million to reduce journey times between Aberdeen and the central belt by 20 minutes by 2026.

Travellers hoped one day to travel the 120-mile route in about two hours; it was hoped that the only section of single track between Aberdeen and continental Europe at Usan might finally be dualled and that sections of the line might be straightened to make it faster. Nine years later, with approximately 5 per cent of the committed money spent, the people of the north-east can finally see what that announcement was—a pre-election gimmick by this rotten devolved Government.

In the north-east, we are getting used to the SNP's broken promises. The £200 million rail improvement programme has gone the same way as the dualling of the A96 and the Alex Salmond commitment to dualling the A90 north of Ellon. The dualling of the A90 north of Ellon is important to many of my constituents, because rail services simply do not exist for many of them. In Aberdeen Donside, there is only one station; in Aberdeenshire East, there is only one station; and in Banffshire and Buchan Coast, there are no stations. I encourage the SNP members who would like to celebrate the removal of peak fares to spare a thought for many in the north-east who will not benefit one bit from this policy—it is central belt bias once again.

Rail services in the north-east could be improved. My colleague Liam Kerr has a petition to open stations at Cove and Newtonhill to the south of Aberdeen, but those calls seem to be falling on deaf ears as no support is forthcoming from the SNP Government. The excellent Campaign for North East Rail proposes new

routes to Fraserburgh and Peterhead, which would unlock huge economic benefits for the north-east. Once again, those proposals have been met with a lukewarm reception from the SNP Government.

When it comes to rail, there are even more SNP broken promises. We were told that rail services would be decarbonised by 2035, but that has since been pushed back a decade and there seems to be very little detail, even for the new deadline. Our diesel trains will have to be replaced soon, and there will be no option but to replace them with other diesel trains—probably more hand-me-down trains from parts of the country that have got their act together and electrified.

I will also quickly mention Caledonian Sleeper. Two years after bringing it into public ownership, the question must be asked—what was the point? There are no new services, fares are not reduced, and its management team is still separate from ScotRail's. The Caledonian Sleeper chief executive costs in the region of a quarter of a million pounds. More integration would have made sense. The change was made at the taxpayer's expense, just to satisfy the egos and ideologies of the SNP.

Overall, ScotRail is running fewer trains than it did before Covid; decarbonisation has been pushed back a decade; ScotRail is running half-a-century-old trains; Caledonian sleeper prices have increased, as has the burden to the taxpayer; and the facilities on board ScotRail trains are miles behind where they should be. The promised £200 million for north-east rail improvements was a lie, and the SNP thinks that that is a cause for celebration.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): Mr Lumsden, you need to conclude.

Douglas Lumsden: Instead of tinkering for tinkering's sake, the SNP should focus on the day job, provide a clean, fast, modern and reliable rail service and actually deliver on the promises that it made.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Lumsden. I remind back benchers that speeches should last for up to six minutes.

16:03

Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): From today's motion, two things are very clear to me: the SNP is good for Scotland's railway, and improvements are easier to make for Scotland's railway when the powers lie here in Scotland.

I am a very regular user of Scotland's railways. I am fresh off a train this morning from my home in Inverness, and I will be back up there again on Thursday night. I often use the far north, west Highland and Kyle lines, as well as the Aberdeen link for getting the ferry to Shetland or Orkney, and many of Scotland's other routes to get along to Caley Thistle away games.

I love being able to work on the train and skip night-time driving, and I sometimes sleep on the train if it is very late. Therefore, I was incredibly excited when, as a candidate, I heard that the SNP was going to commit to nationalising ScotRail in this session. It felt like a strong commitment for a fairer country, because a fairer country must include transport links that are accessible, affordable and appropriate for different areas in the country.

The profit motive of a private company often comes at the expense of long-term investment—a barrier that is no longer in place for this Government. In an online meeting only the night before the announcement, I mentioned that nationalisation would be a great step forward, which led some people in my local branch to credit me with the announcement. I did not make the announcement, but I have been in regular contact with the cabinet secretary and her predecessors to push on some other issues.

There are many things that I would love to see improved about our services and infrastructure in the Highlands. The doubling of the Highland main line has already been mentioned, which would reduce the impact of disruption as well as offer the potential for shorter journey times and more freight capacity. A loop—either at Lentran or Delmore; I am not particularly fussed which one—would build resilience on the far north line, and there are other improvements that could move freight off our roads and passengers out of cars.

A thriving rail network in the north of Scotland is crucial to decarbonising the transport system overall. We must support critical industries in my region, be it wooden pallets from West Fraser or whisky that is travelling from and to everywhere, to become more sustainable. That requires rail freight being a viable alternative to heavy goods vehicles on the A9 or the A96.

Paul Sweeney: The member makes an important point about doing all infrastructure upgrades simultaneously to get the best utilisation of the line. Is there a risk of simply chasing decarbonisation as one metric at the expense of increasing capacity on the line? We need to do both at once, because just doing electrification might preclude further investments in the future.

Emma Roddick: Certainly—I hope that nothing that I have said gave any other indication, because it is one and the same; increasing capacity will decarbonise. Decarbonising in the right order will benefit passengers and those who

use our railway for freight at exactly the same time.

My loyalty to taking the train to work in the Parliament is possible because the time that it takes is comparable to driving, but that is not yet the case everywhere. It can take twice as long to get to Wick by rail than car, and the west Highland line, although scenic, is often not an option for me when attending meetings in the south-west of my region.

I am clear that these improvements are possible only with the Scottish Government in charge, and I am certain that the improvements would be more forthcoming if the Scottish Government were to have control over every aspect of budget setting, revenue raising and our railways. The progress that has been made in this parliamentary session is incredible: nationalising ScotRail and the Caledonian sleeper, scrapping peak rail fares and opening or reopening a number of stations, including at Inverness airport, which I had the pleasure of attending the opening of and making use of since. Many other changes to ticketing have offered my constituents good deals on regular journeys.

That record extends beyond the past four years. The SNP Government was responsible for prolonging my weekly commute from Alness to Inverness as a teenager by reconnecting Conon Bridge to the railway.

Although it seems that most of the cabinet secretary's portfolio—or, at least, the tricky bits—relate to the Highlands and Islands, I also have a great appreciation for what has happened elsewhere. I took the train to Galashiels earlier this year and, it is a deserved point of pride that, regardless of where it is in the country, the longest domestic line in the UK in a century was delivered by the Scottish Government. If the cabinet secretary is ever looking for suggestions on what new line could beat that record, I have a wee wish list of long lines that could keep Scotland on the right track.

We know the impact of new lines. The cabinet secretary's motion mentions an increase in passenger numbers by a fifth, but what that figure cannot tell us—and what we know lies behind it—is about the people who would otherwise have used their cars, as well as the people who would have been stuck at home because they cannot use a car. New lines have people travelling who would otherwise have driven to a retail park instead of shopping in town centres, as well as people who would otherwise shop only online. That increase in passenger numbers has a benefit for those passengers, the climate and local economies.

However, all of that, and whatever we will do in the future, pales in comparison with what would be possible with independence. What has been done under devolution is impressive but it is incomplete. Although it is fantastic to see that the UK Government might be getting ready to follow Scotland in various policies such as nationalising rail, we must be clear that we need to look at having more powers, and certainly not any diminishing of the current situation, which has delivered so much.

Scotland should not need permission to keep improving the railway. With independence would come full fiscal powers and the agility to react to public pressure on what users of the railway need—in short, it would give us the strength here in Scotland to do even more.

Sue Webber: Will the member take an intervention?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The member is about to conclude.

Emma Roddick: Thank you.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The member has concluded.

16:09

Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): I declare an interest as the convener of the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers Scottish parliamentary group.

I will begin with some common ground and some consensus with the Government. In this session of the Parliament, we have seen the removal of Abellio and Serco, and so the removal of foreign and private ownership from Scotland's train operations. They have been replaced by the reintroduction of public ownership of both ScotRail and the Caledonian sleeper. That is a victory, not least for the RMT and the other rail unions, which have never stopped in their campaign, inside and outside the Parliament, for the return of our railways to public ownership.

I applaud, too, the promotion of the Minister for Transport to the rank of cabinet secretary, and the appointment of the general secretary of the Scottish Trades Union Congress to the board of publicly owned Scottish Rail Holdings Ltd, although I have to remind people on a regular basis what Tony Benn, whose centenary we celebrate this year, used to say:

"nationalisation plus Lord Robens does not add up to socialism."

Of course, there is also widespread agreement on the Scottish Government's recent conversion to the scrapping of peak rail fares once and for all, which represents, in my view, another victory for

the campaign that was led first and foremost by the railway trade unions. However, I am bound to say that I never understood why, for a whole year, the Scottish Government maintained that it was only existing, undeserving and—worse yet—middle-class passengers on above-average earnings who gained from the scrapping of peak fares. I never understood that. A policy of peak fares is a tax on all workers travelling to and from their work, who are, by my definition, the working class.

That reawakening by the Government is welcome, but it must go further. Cuts to British Transport Police's operations in Scotland remain a very real and present threat, and are at the forefront of the minds of front-line workers who are dealing with antisocial behaviour, including assaults in our stations and on our trains.

Fiona Hyslop: I share the member's concerns. Those cuts have not come from the Scottish side of the arrangement. He should be making those representations to his UK Labour Government colleagues.

Richard Leonard: Well, let me turn to cuts to the rail systems alliance Scotland budget in control period 7, which have led directly to redundancies and job cuts at Babcock Rail in Scotland over the past year and are compromising safety-critical work. Those cuts must be reversed.

Last Friday, the Cabinet Secretary for Transport announced the purchase of 69 new trains for the ScotRail network—a welcome and long-overdue announcement. However, I hope that the Government will reject the old ways of procurement, where we end up with our trains being owned by private capital and leased through rolling-stock companies, and an oligopoly of private profiteering corporations such as Angel Trains, Porterbrook and Eversholt Rail, which are owned and controlled from Australia, Canada, Germany, France and Hong Kong, which is where all the profits go as well.

I hope that the Cabinet Secretary for Transport will instead issue green bonds—an idea that was backed in a report by ASLEF that was launched in the Parliament this year—as a progressive alternative to extractive capitalism, as a public financing model in place of a private financing model.

In recent weeks, I have also raised with the cabinet secretary the outsourcing of ScotRail customer experience services to Teleperformance, which is a company that promotes the offshoring of its contracts to its South African subsidiary, and a company that is also anti-trade union.

The cabinet secretary tells me that that is an operational decision for ScotRail Trains Ltd, but I ask her in Parliament this afternoon, does she care so little for those workers in Scotland who currently provide that service? What about their upskilling? Where is the Government's fair work first commitment to those workers? Has it just melted? Is it optional? The cabinet secretary should step in, halt that threatened injustice and bring that service and those jobs back in house to benefit both workers and passengers.

Finally, there is something else that the cabinet secretary also regards as an operational matter for ScotRail, which we have debated before but which I must raise again. The big cuts in ticket office opening hours are taking place in almost 100 out of the 143 staffed stations across Scotland. A former First Minister used to try to tell me that this was "modernisation". The cabinet secretary now tells me that those cuts are being done in the name of "front-line customer service improvements", but I say that that is a fraud on the travelling public, because the cabinet secretary knows—as the many representative groups that have opposed that change know—that the removal of staff from railway station ticket offices will not simply deter passengers but will deny many passengers access to public transport altogether.

So I welcome public ownership, but it must be an equal and inclusive public ownership; it must be a transparent and accountable public ownership; and it must be a comprehensive public ownership. Let us have public ownership built on the timeless principles and the enduring ethical practice of popular, democratic and—I would argue—socialist ownership and control.

16:15

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): Under an SNP Government, ScotRail and Caledonian Sleeper have been brought back into public ownership and peak-time rail fares have been abolished. Since 2007, the Scottish Government has invested more than £11 billion in Scotland's rail infrastructure. The past 20 years have been good for Scotland's railways, and the SNP Government's work in supporting our railways and our railway-going passengers has been immense.

However, I hope that I will be forgiven if I focus on Aberdeen and the north-east rather than the whole of Scotland. The past 20 years have seen improvements in north-east rail in three key areas: the upgrading of track, the renovation of old stations and the opening of new stations. For travellers heading north-west from Aberdeen to Inverness, the Aberdeen to Inverness improvement project has resulted in significant gains for passengers.

On the track front, signalling has been enhanced between Insch and Aberdeen, and the line between Inverurie and Kittybrewster junction has been redoubled. With regard to upgrading old stations, the station at Forres has been rebuilt and the platforms at Elgin and Insch stations have been lengthened. Laurencekirk station was reopened. Last but not least, the reopening of Kintore station after 60 years was a critical milestone and has been a great success. The station now sees 28 ScotRail trains stopping daily.

Improvements for points south of Aberdeen are currently under way, thanks to the Aberdeen to central belt enhancement project. The project will see 20 minutes knocked off journey times for Aberdonians heading to Glasgow or Edinburgh. That ambitious project will ensure those improvements. Network Rail has carried out ground investigation work across the entire track, and the defunct bridges at Ironshill and Lunan mill have been demolished. There is much work still to be done, including vital improvements at Aberdeen railway station and the construction of freight loops to manage mixed traffic. When that work is completed, the north-east will enjoy those shorter journey times to the central belt.

Having discussed the past improvements on the line from Aberdeen to Inverness and the present improvements on the line from Aberdeen to Glasgow and Edinburgh, it is vital that we do not lose sight of future improvements for the railways in the north-east. That future has to be the reopening of the lines from Aberdeen to Peterhead and Fraserburgh. Thanks to the better together alliance of the Tories commissioning the Beeching cuts and the Labour Party wielding the actual axe, Peterhead is the largest settlement in mainland UK without a railway station, and Fraserburgh is the second largest.

That was a terrible injustice and it is an unacceptable status quo. The Campaign for North East Rail is a grass-roots movement driven by engineers and local advocates who have put forward a clear and well-researched blueprint for a revitalised railway network. The campaign is about more than trains; it is about regenerating our coastal towns, supporting our vital fishing industry by enabling the shift of freight from road to rail, and unlocking the economic potential of our region. Most importantly, it is about the moral and economic imperative to ensure that no community is left behind.

Last year, the Campaign for North East Rail and Aberdeen and Grampian Chamber of Commerce produced the “Buchan Sustainable Transport Study”, which provides a compelling evidence base for reopening the Aberdeen to Peterhead line. There are a number of reasons why that is an imperative. The lack of a railway means that lorryloads of beer and truckloads of fish often share single-track roads with folk commuting to work and folk taking their kids on the school run. Improving freight transport would also make a vital contribution to the economic regeneration of the area. However, as usual, it is those who rely on public transport in those areas who are hit the hardest—85 per cent of the people who would like to take the bus often decide not to because of the long journey and unreliable bus services. That is a major blight on the folk of the north-east. Improved public transport connectivity would be a major force in improving the economic opportunities for everyday folk in our corner of Scotland.

Therefore, I ask the cabinet secretary to consider the major advantages that are now at play as a result of the rail lines in the Borders and Leven, as we have heard, and to think about doing the same for the north-east. Listen to the Campaign for North East Rail and the Aberdeen and Grampian Chamber of Commerce. Let us do right and put to bed the wrongs of Beeching, which led to the closure of the lines from Aberdeen to Peterhead and Fraserburgh.

16:21

Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con): The motion that is before us is classic SNP—a self-congratulatory tale of trumpets and selective successes that ignores glaring failures. If Thomas the Tank Engine ran Scotland’s railways, we would have really useful engines. Under the SNP, it could be argued that we have had really useless policies. Yes, there have been new stations, some electrification and anniversaries to celebrate, but behind the rhetoric lies a Government that has let Scotland’s transport infrastructure—and, with it, our economy—fall behind. The SNP is a master of patting itself on the back, but, when it comes to real delivery, particularly in Glasgow, it is utterly failing. Like Gordon, the big engine, the SNP loves to boast that it is the fastest, but, when we look at the timetable, we see that it is always running late.

Nowhere is that more obvious than in the Government’s gold-standard incompetence in failing to deliver a rail link between Glasgow airport and Glasgow city centre. That is not a minor omission. Glasgow airport is arguably Scotland’s principal business airport, and, in my opinion, it is its most important one. It is the gateway for conferences at the SEC, for tourism across the west of Scotland and for international investment. However, unlike airports in Manchester, London and even Vilnius, in Lithuania, there is no direct rail connection. Instead, travellers step off their flights into traffic jams and bus queues. That is not the image of a modern and forward-thinking Scotland; rather, it is

symbolic of the shambles that the SNP has created with its economic incompetence.

Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): I agree that a rail link between Glasgow city centre and the airport would be fantastic, but does Sandesh Gulhane realise that, due to the limitations of the track coming out of Glasgow, that could impact services to Ayrshire? I am sure that he would not want those services to be impacted. Will he ask for investment in the track itself?

Sandesh Gulhane: Elena Whitham leads me on to the next part of my speech. Let us cast our minds back to a little project called the Glasgow airport rail link, which was planned, costed and backed by business in 2006. The environmental statement and economic impact assessment that Strathclyde Partnership for Transport produced showed the clear benefits of delivering such a rail link: faster journeys, reduced congestion, reduced emissions and billions—yes, billions—of pounds in long-term economic gain. What happened? In 2009, the SNP pulled the brakes. The project was cancelled and gone. Since then, there has been a decade and a half of dithering excuses, glossy brochures and so-called reviews.

The Government now tells us that the Clyde metro is the answer, but the Clyde metro is not a train but a bedtime story. We are expected to sit like railway children, waving our flags and waiting for salvation to appear at the end of the tunnel, but there is no train coming—just more SNP announcements of delays again and again. The SNP admits it. The case for investment is not due to be completed until 2027. That means more years of waiting, more years of lost opportunity and more years of watching Edinburgh—yes, Edinburgh—overtake Glasgow as the airport of choice, even for a number of Glaswegians.

As a Glasgow region MSP, I hear from business leaders, from the Glasgow Chamber of Commerce and from constituents, and they are crying out for this connection. They know about missed opportunities such as convention organisers choosing other cities because they cannot ask delegates to waste precious time on the M8. In fact, work that is due to start on the M8 this week is set to cause nine months of further disruptions, including overnight closures on the eastbound and westbound carriageways at junction 26. Investors also look elsewhere, and tourists who might have chosen Glasgow take the easier option and fly into Edinburgh.

The SNP is good at blowing the whistle and shouting, “Peep, peep!”, but ministers do not have their eyes on the track, certainly when it comes to connecting Glasgow with its airport. That could all have been avoided if the SNP had acted when it had the chance. In contrast, Manchester has had a rail link to its airport since 1993. Luton airport has a direct air-rail transit driverless shuttle, which takes passengers from the station to the terminal in minutes and connects seamlessly with frequent trains to London. Even Lithuania has an airport rail service. If they can do it, why can Scotland’s largest city not do it?

The answer is simple. Under the SNP, infrastructure is sacrificed to political priorities, competence is in short supply and ministers never feel the consequences. After all, they have their governmental limos. If Thomas the Tank Engine ran Scotland’s railways, Glasgow would already have a line to the airport, but SNP ministers are in control and all that we have are weighty excuses.

It is not just Glasgow airport. Let us look at the wider picture. Services have been cut since the pandemic, electrification plans have been delayed, the sleeper service is more expensive but no better, and 50-year-old trains are still in use.

Tragically, the Stonehaven rail crash reminded us all that safety must come before spin. Let us also not forget that, since 2006, the Scottish Government has been responsible for ensuring that our railways are safe and resilient. Five years on from the Stonehaven rail tragedy, key improvements that were demanded by investigators have yet to be completed. Scotland deserves better, Glasgow deserves better and our economy deserves better. The truth is that connectivity is not just about transport but about growth. It is about making Glasgow a competitive global city and supporting our national health service staff, businesses and communities that rely on having reliable, efficient links.

16:27

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): Despite the unexpectedly miserable contributions of Sandesh Gulhane and Douglas Lumsden, I have something in common with Douglas Lumsden. I, too, am a railway geek. I prefer to let the train take the strain.

Today, I shall concentrate on the success of Borders railway, because today marks exactly 10 years since its formal reopening. Viewing a map of the pre-Beeching rail network in Scotland is eye opening. The first Beeching report identified more than 2,000 stations and 5,000 miles of railway line for closure—55 per cent of stations and 30 per cent of route miles. On 5 January 1969, the Waverley line was one victim of those cuts. Those cuts did not stem losses and at that time, no account was taken of the wider social and economic impact of railways. Today, we take account of that impact and—crucially—the reduction of the emissions that are so damaging to this planet. Electrification was part of the future

proofing of the Borders railway and it is now on the cards, as is new rolling stock.

The project to return the Borders railway took root with a 17,000-signature petition to the Scottish Parliament in the name of Petra Biberbach. I met her by chance on Gala high street just after my election in 1999. As a member of the Parliament's Public Petitions Committee, I advised her that that petition should be presented to the committee. It was. In 1999, the campaign for Borders rail was also established, and I set up the parliamentary cross-party group for Borders rail here. However, it was not an easy parliamentary route. Sarah Boyack will understand, because she went through it with me.

A feasibility study, the Scott Wilson report, stated that patronage projections for a new line were not encouraging and that none of the route options that were examined produced a positive cost benefit value. How wrong was that?

The economic case was built on projected housing developments: 700 in the Borders and 1,100 in Midlothian. Unbelievably, that led to an anti-rail backlash from the breakaway local Borders Party, which described the proposal as

"a colossal waste of money".

The Tories also called at the time for the money not to be used for the project, but to be used instead for dualling the A7—although, thankfully, they later recanted.

In time, the petition received the unanimous support of the Parliament's Rural Affairs Committee and, on 14 June 2006, the bill to restore the line was almost unanimously passed. In 2007 the SNP Government committed to build the line, and build it it did.

I reprise that, because the predictions were way off course. For Sue Webber, I say that that past achievement builds the case for future rail developments. As for how to build a railway, practical lessons were learned. Nobody had built one here in years.

The huge housing developments happened. Fields next to the station at Shawfair will soon be bursting with new homes. There is already easy access to the railway at Gorebridge, Newtongrange and Tweedbank. One look at the full car parks shows us how busy the line is—which is far flung from the gloomy predictions. People are taking the train, not the A7.

Here are some statistics. The Borders railway has had a significant increase in the number of passengers, rising from an initial forecast of 600,000 and approaching 2 million in 2018-19. By September this year, there had been more than 13 million passenger journeys since the line's opening. In its wake, former railway buildings along the line have been transformed through community efforts at Newtongrange and at Stow station house, and there are now proposals for Gorebridge station house. Groups such as the Signal Box in Galashiels are working to raise funds for the Campaign for Borders Rail, and beautiful station flower displays—the display at Gorebridge being particularly stunning this year—are wholly maintained by a few volunteers. The communities take their railway very personally, having won it themselves.

This is, of course, about passengers. Removing peak fares will save someone travelling from Tweedbank to Edinburgh at least £7 a day, so there will be more bums on seats. Kids for a quid is another excellent initiative. The railway is about so much more: it concerns the wider economy and the social fabric of communities.

The Borders railway has not just pioneered how to build a railway; it has shown what the economic and social benefits of a railway are. Its extension through Hawick to Carlisle will complete that social and economic journey, and it is living proof for other future railway developments.

16:32

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): I refer to my entry in the register of members' interests.

It is a pleasure to follow Christine Grahame. I was very pleased that she raised the Beeching cuts, which I believe have proved to be a disaster for many communities.

I hope that we all now accept that supporting and extending rail services is vital to meeting our climate change targets and to making transport more sustainable. The scrapping of peak fares, which came into effect last week, is very welcome. Ending peak fares is important for increasing passenger numbers by making rail travel more affordable for working people. That is why the Scottish Government's decision to end the pilot scheme last year was strongly opposed by both passengers and rail unions, and it is a testament to their tireless campaigning that the Scottish Government has now changed its position and has scrapped peak fares. I congratulate the cabinet secretary on that decision.

While the scrapping of peak fares will make rail travel more affordable for many, people in many parts of Scotland will not benefit. It is important that rail travel is truly accessible for all passengers, and that is why the rail unions and campaigners have repeatedly warned about the impact of cuts on ticket office opening hours. Reducing ticket office opening hours means that some stations will no longer have guaranteed staffing for notable periods of time. That leaves many passengers—women, the disabled and the

elderly, in particular—unable to seek assistance, and it leads to passengers feeling unsafe at a time when crime on Scotland's rail network is increasing.

Jamie Greene: I agree with what Katy Clark is saying about the closure of ticket offices, but we should remind the wider travelling public about the enhanced closed-circuit television and help point monitoring that is in place in every station. I have been to the centre in Paisley that monitors that, and I hope that Ms Clark can do the same. We should promote that and encourage people to feel that that makes our stations as safe as they can be without ticket offices.

Katy Clark: Scottish Government research has shown that passengers feel safer at staffed stations. I take on board what Jamie Greene is saying, but women, in particular, and other groups tell us repeatedly that they feel safer if there are staff available. However, many stations across the West Scotland region are being affected by cuts to ticket office opening hours. Ticket offices at Ardrossan South Beach, Irvine, Largs and Saltcoats stations, along with many others, are seeing opening hours reduced by at least one hour or more.

There are on-going issues with the punctuality and reliability of ScotRail services, which the Scottish Government must address. ScotRail, as has been said, is still running fewer services than it ran before the pandemic. ScotRail ran more than 63,000 services this July, which is 6,000 fewer than in July 2019. More than 17,000 services were cancelled last year, and more than 55 per cent of services failed to arrive at their scheduled time.

Last year, I raised concerns about the punctuality and reliability of the Largs to Glasgow line. More than 200 trains were cancelled on that line alone last year, and more than 500 services were late. In 2023, a total of 455 services on that line were either fully or partially cancelled, which is simply not good enough. The repeated failure to deliver rail services for the people of Largs, Ardrossan and the wider area is unacceptable and, unfortunately, that is not an isolated example. I hope that action is now being taken to improve infrastructure, reduce cancellations and ensure that trains run on time.

As I said, crime on Scotland's rail network is increasing. Reported crime has increased by a third since before the pandemic. The number of reported sex crimes has increased by two thirds over the same period. More than 200 women and girls were assaulted or harassed or faced unwanted sexual behaviour on Scotland's rail services in the past year alone.

Rail workers, too, are facing an unacceptable level of abuse and violence, and rail workers have raised concerns about the abuse that they receive. Women transport workers, in particular, have told me about the increase in threatening behaviour that they are subjected to. ScotRail staff were subjected to more than 100 attacks on trains and at stations last year, which is more than double the number that was reported in 2022. I hope that the cabinet secretary will outline what steps the Scottish Government is taking to improve the safety of rail services for women and girls.

The UK Government's proposals to create a single, publicly owned and nationally integrated rail network are welcome. I hope that Scottish and UK ministers will be able to work together to ensure that the proposed Great British railways and ScotRail deliver improvements to infrastructure, reliability and safety, and I hope that we continue to have debates of this nature in the chamber.

16:39

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Reform): The Cabinet Secretary for Transport has disappointed me. She persists in using kilometres, as she has done in the Government motion, when we use miles in this country. The "570 kilometres" in the motion should be "354 miles".

I think that we all want ScotRail to succeed. Many of us use the train regularly. It is the backbone of Scotland's public transport system, but we must accept that there are challenges with it. In the past year alone, more than 17,000 train services were cancelled and far too many are still not arriving on time.

Fiona Hyslop: Will the member give way on that point?

Graham Simpson: I have very, very little time, but I will let the cabinet secretary in.

Fiona Hyslop: Does the member realise that there are hundreds of thousands of journeys, that cancellations affect just a few percent of those and that many are caused by infrastructure, for which Network Rail is responsible, or by the many storms that we have had, not least storm Floris a few weeks ago?

Graham Simpson: I am going to cheer up the cabinet secretary, because I have some positive things to say. Overall customer satisfaction with ScotRail is 91 per cent. That is among the best in Britain and we must accept that. Punctuality is at 92.9 per cent, which sounds pretty good although it is still not good enough. We must accept that, but we do need more investment in infrastructure, more modern signalling, track upgrades and station improvements. It is still the case that ScotRail has one of the oldest fleets in Britain. We

need more electrification and a plan for battery electric trains to reduce emissions and improve service quality and we need the hydrogen that Jamie Greene mentioned.

Affordability is key. Some speakers have mentioned the removal of peak fares. I remember leading a debate here and Parliament voting to end peak fares. The Scottish Government had to be dragged kicking and screaming to do that, but I am glad that it has.

We need integrated ticketing—the cabinet secretary knows that I have been going on about that for what seems like years—and it must work across trains, buses, trams and ferries. I am lucky enough to live in East Kilbride, which has had some welcome investment. We have two fantastic new stations and are going to get electric trains, which is great.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please bring your remarks to a close, Mr Simpson.

Graham Simpson: I will.

There is more work to do, but we must celebrate what has been done well and must thank the staff of ScotRail for doing that.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to closing speeches.

16:42

Mark Ruskell: We have had a pretty passionate debate that has certainly given all the railway geeks in the chamber their six minutes of fame, although Sandesh Gulhane will not be replacing Michael “choo-choo” Portillo any time soon. Kevin Stewart spoke passionately about the campaign for rail in the north-east and Christine Grahame spoke passionately about the Borders railway and next steps there. We have heard about Winchburgh and Newburgh and about new lines in the Highlands.

The cabinet secretary is right to underline the successes that we have had in opening new stations: there are 25 stations on four new lines. I was in Levenmouth earlier this year when the rail line was reopened. It was a hugely emotional day that spoke to the perseverance that Claire Baker referred to as that community built a case for the reopening of the Levenmouth line. It was an incredible day and I am pleased that the number of services has now gone up to two every hour, which is fantastic.

Sue Webber has a point. I never thought that I would say those words in the chamber, but she has a point about how we plan for new or reopened rail stations. The case for the reopening of individual rail stations does not feature anywhere at all in the strategic transport projects review, which is Scotland’s big strategic plan for transport. Rail station reopenings are treated on an individual, case-by-case, basis and not seen as being strategic, even though they are part of a network.

A number of years ago, the Greens successfully made a case to the Scottish Government that we need a seed fund for local rail development to help communities put together business cases for station reopenings. I am pleased that Newburgh, St Andrews and other communities around Scotland have benefited from that, but there is a frustration that it takes years and years to get through the Scottish transport appraisal guidance process, to engage with Transport Scotland officials and regional transport partnerships and to build a case so that communities can become part of that bigger network. I am heartened by what the cabinet secretary said about Newburgh and a decision being made fairly soon, but that has been years in the making and community stamina is an issue.

We have had a few contributions on rolling stock. I quite enjoyed Richard Leonard’s reflection that the rolling stock companies are, in effect, an oligopoly of extractive capitalism. We need to pay a bit more attention to the ASLEF report. The Government has the opportunity here, and in a number of other areas, to issue green bonds that would reinvest the revenues in our public transport system. I note that Caledonian Rail Leasing Ltd is owned by foreign companies. It generated £1.3 billion-worth of dividends between 2012 and 2018, which were largely removed from this country and invested elsewhere. Other models are possible; other models are normal elsewhere. Transport for London invested directly in the trains that were needed for Crossrail. Of course we need full borrowing powers, as Emma Roddick set out, but we can also use the powers that we have.

On the passenger experience, a number of members have talked about timetables and whether we should go back to the timetables of the pre-Covid world. We have to recognise that the world has moved on, and it would be very difficult to restore in full the timetables that we had. There has been a shift to the busiest time—

Kevin Stewart: Will the member take an intervention?

Mark Ruskell: I will expand this point first. There has been a shift in that the greatest rail usage is now for leisure travel. The removal of peak rail fares speaks to the post-Covid world that we live in. Yes, there is a need to restore some services, but I do not think that simply going back to the pre-Covid world would be acceptable. I will take the intervention if it is brief.

Kevin Stewart: I am glad that Mr Ruskell has highlighted the changes in travel patterns. Does he agree that, if we went back to the pre-Covid timetable, we might lose weekend services that are doing very well and bringing a lot of income into our national railway system?

Mark Ruskell: That was my point—that peak usage now is leisure usage, and that is very much at the weekend. Yes, we should restore services, but we have to see where we are at.

A number of members have talked about safety. Like Jamie Greene, I went to one of the customer service centres that ScotRail runs—I went to the one in Dunfermline, which is for the other half of Scotland. I was impressed by how much attention ScotRail is able to give customers through those customer service points. It is able to offer all kinds of advice and support, but I wonder whether that message is really getting out there. However, I still agree with Katy Clark that we must monitor the changes in ticket office opening hours, and I have concerns about vulnerable passengers.

I will finish by talking about first-class ticketing. The discussion on this today has really just been between me and the cabinet secretary, and I am impressed that she came to the debate with a list of all the services on which there is no first-class seating. However, if there is no first-class seating on the service from Dunblane to Edinburgh, why do we have it on the service from Glasgow to Edinburgh? Really, there is no first-class offering on ScotRail services any more. There is not a leisure first-class offering, as is the case on services that are run by LNER and some other UK train operating companies, so what is the point of it any more? ScotRail gets a little bit of income from it, if, say, a passenger is travelling from Edinburgh or Aberdeen to London. However, overall, on those key commuter routes, we should be freeing up the seats and allowing people to sit anywhere, because the good news is that peak rail fares have gone and I think that we are going to see increased patronage of our railways—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Ruskell, you need to conclude.

Mark Ruskell: —and getting rid of first class is a good step towards that.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Sarah Boyack to close the debate on behalf of Scottish Labour.

16:48

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): I welcome today's debate, because there is huge interest across the chamber in improving our rail services right across Scotland, including in the Lothians. Communities such as Winchburgh have been promised a station for years. I thank Lawrence Fitzpatrick, the leader of West Lothian Council, for his persistence in pushing for that station. Without a station, it is harder for people to get to work, which leads to more delays and congestion on our roads—and that is not good enough.

Claire Baker's points about overcrowding also urgently need to be addressed. Christine Grahame mentioned the Borders railway. Way more people are using it than was anticipated, and we need the trains to be big enough. Trains from East Lothian and Fife are now regularly at capacity, and passengers can be left standing. On some key routes, there are not even enough bike spaces, so addressing capacity is key.

As we have discussed, the abolition of peak rail fares is a huge opportunity for Scotland, because it makes rail travel more affordable and has the potential to encourage people out of their cars. However, it was a long time coming; it was the result of cross-party pressure and work by trade unions. If there is to be a real shift, we need the capacity on our trains so that people can use them.

We also need to have railway stations that enable people to get access to our trains. When I was transport minister in the first session of the Parliament, I was proud to approve the Airdrie to Bathgate, Larkhall to Milngavie and Stirling to Alloa lines. It is good to see that it is 20 years since the Airdrie to Bathgate line was opened. [*Interruption*.] Sorry, it is 15 years. In December, we will be able to celebrate the anniversary of the opening of the Larkhall to Milngavie line. There is something about the benefits of that work.

Mark Ruskell's point about strategic planning is absolutely critical, because we need to take a national approach to supporting our regions—one that benefits passengers, our economy and our environment. It was therefore good to hear about the north-east. I would like to have heard a bit more about Inverness, because the northern routes urgently need access to passenger and freight connectivity. Before the summer, we were lobbied by the freight sector about the need to link freight routes to ferry connections in the south-west of Scotland. There is therefore a lot of work to be done.

We need to go further and make sure that stations are properly connected, with access to local buses, safe cycling routes and walking access. A key issue is accessibility—step-free access, lifts and ramps. We need to make sure that our railways are accessible for everybody.

The debate's title refers to a strong platform, but platforms do not sell tickets. Several colleagues have talked about ticket offices. Although many of us use the ScotRail app, Audit Scotland has

highlighted the fact that around one in 10 people do not have internet access and that around one in six lack foundational digital skills. If we are to get a sustained level of modal shift, we need to make sure that accessibility is built in. For example, Waverley station relocated its ticket office this summer, making it less accessible for a lot of passengers who need to get tickets in person and who also need in-person assistance. In her summing up, I would like to hear from the cabinet secretary about the companion travel scheme. I have been working with Sight Scotland and the Royal National Institute of Blind People Scotland, which are pushing for passengers to get the support that they need when they need it, so that everybody can travel on our trains.

We also need to make sure that passengers and railway staff are safe. The points that were made by Katy Clark and Richard Leonard about women passengers were very powerful. It is shocking, too, that 70 per cent of RMT's ScotRail members had experienced violence at work in the past year, with 80 per cent of those staff being lone workers. Again, I hope that the cabinet secretary will outline what action can be taken to make people safe on our trains.

We need to build a railway that people feel is safe, is accessible and is worth the fare that they pay, and that it deliberately links our economy and our climate ambitions. It needs to be fit for purpose and resilient to extreme weather. Passengers deserve better.

I will focus briefly on the fact that UK rail reforms will be a massive benefit. There are explicitly no plans to diminish the powers of Scottish ministers. As has been discussed, we need joint working between the UK and Scottish Governments. Particularly in Scotland, we need more trains, because, every day, 250 fewer run than was the case pre-pandemic. We need more trains—accessible and affordable trains that everybody can access across the country. If we do that, we will build passenger confidence, build our economy and support our environment. Let us work together to get that done.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Finlay Carson to close the debate on behalf of the Scottish Conservatives.

16:54

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): Today's debate is a timely and important opportunity to reflect on the progress—satisfactory or otherwise—that has been made across Scotland's railways. From the contributions that have been made this afternoon, it is clear that there is cross-party consensus for a railway that delivers value for money and puts passengers first.

Jamie Greene reinforced the Scottish Conservatives' point that we need the private sector to ensure a reliable and efficient service in modern, comfortable surroundings, without its requiring passengers to take out a second mortgage for a ticket. If we can do that, we are halfway towards winning back public confidence, which is key to encouraging modal shift.

Sue Webber and others spoke of the recent removal of peak rail fares. That is a welcome step, and we on the Conservative benches are pleased to see the Scottish Government respond to calls from across the chamber to scrap the two-tier system. It is a welcome U-turn on the Scottish Government's premature decision to end the first trial.

Across the chamber, we accept that the journey ahead will not be easy. Much of Scotland's rail infrastructure dates back to the 19th century, and that presents real challenges. If we are serious about modernisation, both the Scottish and UK Governments must work together to unlock private investment and commit to long-term upgrades.

We heard that Douglas Lumsden likes a bit of nostalgia. He loves nostalgia so much that he is still emotionally stuck in 1983, back when Aberdeen beat Real Madrid and perms were peak fashion. However, that nostalgia does not cover the 50-year-old InterCity trains still serving in Nigeria and Scotland. He highlighted the central belt bias when it comes to new rolling stock. If he thinks that it is bad in the north-east, he should pay a visit to Stranraer, where the first train of the morning is referred to as the polar express, because of the lack of heating.

I will not spend any more time summing up other members' contributions. Apart from the cabinet secretary's speech, without exception the calls from across the chamber were for more to be done, and quicker.

My colleague Sue Webber, a long-time campaigner for Winchburgh railway station, called for new developments, saying that they should be aligned with areas of population growth. However, we must be cautious. Expansion must not come at the expense of rural and remote communities. Scotland's railways must serve all of Scotland, not just the central belt. I will therefore use my time to shine a spotlight on the south-west, particularly Stranraer and the strategically vital port at Cairnryan.

Like the region's road network, the railway in the area has been neglected for far too long. Back in 2012, Keith Brown, the then transport minister, and First Minister Alex Salmond set up the Stranraer task force. At the time, Keith Brown said:

> "I again repeat the Scottish Government's absolute commitment to rail services in Stranraer and, indeed, to doing all that we can do to improve and develop the service. Our current Rail 2014 consultation allows the public to have their say in the future of the railways in Scotland and I can assure passengers that we will continue to ensure the delivery of the best possible service."

Since then—surprise, surprise—services are less frequent and more focused on connections at Ayr rather than direct trains to Glasgow. More trains now terminate at Ayr, requiring passengers to change for Glasgow, and there are fewer early morning and late evening options in comparison with the situation pre-Covid. That is hardly an improvement.

Stranraer is a town with a proud past and now—finally—there is momentum. Thanks to the Borderlands inclusive growth deal and the Stranraer place plan, we are seeing real investment, including a waterfront redevelopment that is expected to attract tens of thousands of additional visitors annually. However, one thing is missing: a modern, reliable rail service to support that revival.

We need a long-term strategy to improve passenger services, unlock freight potential and, in particular, shift heavy goods off the dangerous A77 and the A75. Cairnryan remains a key national asset, yet lorries have to depend on those unfit-for-purpose roads. Investment in rail freight is not just a local issue, but a strategic priority for Scotland and the UK.

Despite repeated commitments, post-Covid, rail services to and from Stranraer remain poor. Communities are isolated, economic recovery has stalled and passengers face some of the highest fares per mile in Scotland. The Stranraer service was suspended for more than 10 months following an arson attack on Ayr station hotel. One has to ask oneself whether such a delay would be tolerated elsewhere.

The south-west is not a cul-de-sac; it is a corridor of opportunity. I am calling for a feasibility study to extend freight capabilities to Cairnryan, a clear timetable to restore pre-Covid service levels and address unfair rail fares, and a renewed commitment to station improvements in Stranraer, including the creation of a new, fit-for-purpose facility that reflects the town's ambition and serves the needs of 21st century travellers.

For nine years, I have worked with stakeholders to make that vision a reality. What my constituents and rail passengers across Scotland want is simple: a ticket to ride, not the track of their tears.

16:59

Fiona Hyslop: Today's subject matter is of enormous importance, and the debate has provided a timely opportunity for the Parliament to mark the achievements of many people who have contributed to the rail industry in Scotland over the past 20 years. It also allows us to set out what will happen next on our railways and to set out our aims for—and express our concerns about—the UK Government's imminent railways bill. People have shown their passion and interest in rail, and I am delighted that the Government has been able to provide the opportunity to discuss different points. I will address a number of those that were made during the debate.

Sue Webber talked about the need for fleet replacement. The new intercity trains are being procured. On Friday, I announced that the Fife and Borders fleets will be procured, and so will the suburban fleet. To answer Sarah Boyack's question about accessibility, the fleets will have step-free access.

Sue Webber also raised concerns about boom and bust in rail investment. That is a criticism from the rail industry for the UK as a whole. In Scotland, the industry says that we have managed to have steady investment, which allows for planning, keeps project teams together and keeps supply chains intact.

Claire Baker raised the Fife circle issue. We recently had an exchange, and her point about the measurement of short-forming is reasonable. I note that she welcomed the investment in electrification and the battery electric fleet for that line.

Claire Baker and others, such as Katy Clark, raised women's safety issues, which my predecessors and I have taken very seriously. The travel safe teams have been expanded. The ticket offices issue is about staff visibility. There are more staff visible on our railways now than ever before. One issue that I raised was about access and visibility from ticket offices to platforms. Only 97 per cent of those that were impacted had visibility of the platforms. However, the points that a number of members made about CCTV and so on need to be communicated a bit more.

I am concerned about the British Transport Police issues, so if Claire Baker can do anything in relation to the UK Department for Transport's cuts, that is an issue that needs to be raised. We are also working with our justice colleagues to look at other powers that might be available to help with prosecutions, which people are keen to see, although the cases that are reported are being prosecuted.

Mark Ruskell raised a number of issues, including that of unused first-class services. Currently, they generate £8.5 million in income, so he may want to have a further discussion about what that means for earnings, but he is right on

the commuter aspects. Those services have been declassified, although I doubt that many people know about that. Therefore, that might be a communication point that has to be addressed.

Mark Ruskell and Richard Leonard also raised a point about bonds and, in particular, ASLEF's proposal for green bonds. The Scottish Government continues with its due diligence process on the work towards Scottish Government bonds, which is in line with the approach that was outlined in the 2025-26 Scottish budget and the 2025 medium-term financial strategy. We have engaged with ASLEF, which actually underestimates the savings that can be made. However, there is a restriction on our borrowing, and bonds would count against that. As a Government, the limits on our borrowing are prohibitive, and that, too, needs to be addressed.

Jamie Greene raised a number of important points. He asked why I said that it was unaffordable to extend the pilot scheme to remove peak rail fares. It is important to remember that the pilot was a pilot. Finlay Carson said that it was ended prematurely, but it was not, because it was extended twice—once when the Greens were still in power and once when they left the Government. I extended the pilot because I wanted it to have more time to be successful. Anyone who remembers last summer will know that there was the minor incident of an emergency budget that occurred when the new UK Government came into power, which caused major affordability issues. The Tories have delusions about their influence, because I always said in debates that, if funds became available for my budget, I would reintroduce the removal of peak rail fares. Why? Because certainty is important. The fact that peak fares are now gone for good will help people to make the decision to switch, which is where the modal shift will come from.

Finlay Carson raised an important general point about decarbonised transport. In our climate change preparations, we will be setting out a number of measures in transport areas. We are already taking action in relation to heavy goods vehicle reductions and what we can do in that territory, and more will come on that issue.

Members raised other issues—Douglas Lumsden and others highlighted issues with various stations. With regard to the proposals for stations at Cove and Newtonhill, I refer Douglas Lumsden to the decisions that were made by the North East of Scotland Transport Partnership. There have been discussions between my officials and the Nestrans board, but the next stage is the development of a strategic business case, and that sits with the Nestrans board.

We heard similar passion in contributions from other members. I pay tribute to Christine Grahame for her role in supporting the Borders railway, and I look forward to joining her and representatives of Scottish Borders Council tonight as we celebrate and mark 10 years since the railway's official opening.

Emma Roddick talked about the Highlands, and both she and Finlay Carson highlighted the point that, while population growth, which the Conservative amendment mentions, is an important aspect, we need to identify what can be done in other parts of Scotland. I was recently on the Alness line in the far north, looking at the maintenance improvements.

That leads me on to Richard Leonard's point—

Sandesh Gulhane: Will the cabinet secretary take an intervention?

Fiona Hyslop: Oh no—after his miserabilist contribution, there is no way that I am taking an intervention from Sandesh Gulhane.

Richard Leonard needs to address the issues around the budget. I have had exchanges with him, and we have sat down with the RMT. There has been a 34.9 per cent increase in our rail infrastructure improvement and rolling stock projects budget this year in comparison with last year. The network budget was down, but there was an issue around the international financial reporting standards capital cover for leasing stock; that will also impact on the UK Government when it is trying to integrate track and train and bring in public ownership. It is an accounting issue; in effect, the real capital budget increased by £63.8 million—

Douglas Lumsden: Will the cabinet secretary give way?

Fiona Hyslop: No, I want to make progress.

With regard to other areas, Kevin Stewart was right to talk about the north-east and the rail campaign there. Everybody has demands, and we want to continue to improve where we can.

I will bring my remarks to a conclusion. Yes, people want to see improvement—in fact, Graham Simpson at least recognised that there is growing public satisfaction, and we have one of the best performance records in comparison with the rest of the UK. However, there is more to be done.

I also want to address the important point that was made about the campaign by Sight Scotland for companions for blind people. The pilot is happening just now, and that is a very important part of what we are doing to try to ensure that companions can help to support those who have needs in that area. I encourage members to publicise that pilot.

On where we go from here, we need investment, but we also need to ensure that

people understand that railways and transport investment are not only about services that provide a contractual arrangement for going from A to B, but about communities, resilience and the economy.

With regard to freight, which was mentioned, we have been able to reintroduce the rail freight grant this year.

Finlay Carson: *rose—*

Fiona Hyslop: I am sorry, but I really need to bring my remarks to a close.

We have ambitions for the railway, and we have had success in bringing together track and train in Scotland, but I continue to have concerns about the UK rail reform bill. I appreciate the reassurances from Lord Hendy—whom I have had meetings with and will continue to meet—that he does not want to see a diminution. However, until we see the legislation, the proposed UK vertical integration presents a real quandary and conundrum in respect of how it might apply to Scotland.

It is important that we, collectively, send a message that we value our devolved responsibilities. In supporting the motion today, we can meet that challenge and, prior to the introduction of the UK Government's railways bill, send a strong signal that is wholly in keeping with the efforts over the past 20 years. We are hugely proud of Scotland's railway, and it should be afforded the power that it needs to secure the best possible outcomes for the people and businesses of Scotland and deliver the improvements and the extension of services that the people of Scotland want, need and deserve.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate on 20 years of Scotland's railway providing a strong platform for the future.

Business Motions

17:09

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-18786, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on changes to the business programme.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees—

(a) to the following revisions to the programme of business for Wednesday 10 September 2025—

after	
followed by	Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party Debate: Impact of Accommodating Asylum Seekers on Scottish Local Government
insert	
followed by	Motion on Legislative Consent: Bus Services (No. 2) Bill - UK Legislation
delete	
5.10 pm	Decision Time
and insert	
5.40 pm	Decision Time

(b) that, for the purposes of consideration of the legislative consent memorandum on the Bus Services (No. 2) Bill, Rules 9B.3.5 and 9B.3.6 of Standing Orders are suspended.

The Presiding Officer: I call Douglas Lumsden.

17:09

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): As a Parliament, we have standing orders in place to support good governance. Therefore, the Scottish Conservatives intend to oppose this revision to the business programme, as it suspends the standing orders to subvert normal process, which I will expand on in tomorrow's legislative consent motion debate after today's motion inevitably passes.

The Presiding Officer: I call Jamie Hepburn to respond on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau.

17:09

The Minister for Parliamentary Business (Jamie Hepburn): It is important that we place the amendment to business in its proper context. The report stage for the bill that the LCM relates to is in the House of Commons tomorrow. Therefore, the LCM requires expedited consideration by Parliament, because the amendment that triggers the requirement for legislative consent has been tabled at this late stage in the bill's passage, and

the United Kingdom Government is seeking assurances that the Scottish Parliament is granting its consent and that it will be secured before amending stages are complete.

The amendment is important because it helps to further our collective ambition to tackle climate change and facilitate the uptake of zero emission buses.

Given that the bill is about to reach the last amending stage, it would be desirable for Parliament to consider whether its views can still influence the final form of the bill. The only way to achieve that is to suspend standing orders so that the LCM can be taken in the chamber without committee consideration.

However, the committee's views were sought and its views were that, given the time constraints, the best option would be to vary standing orders to allow the LCM to be taken directly in the chamber.

If Parliament does not get the opportunity to debate the motion on legislative consent tomorrow, there is the risk that the bill, as amended, proceeds to royal assent without this Parliament having had the opportunity to consider the matter and grant its consent. I imagine that all parliamentarians, including Mr Lumsden, want to avoid that.

The Presiding Officer: The question is, that motion S6M-18786 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.

17:11

Meeting suspended.

17:15

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: We come to the vote on motion S6M-18786, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on changes to the business programme. Members should cast their votes now.

The vote is closed.

Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I would have voted to abstain.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Dr Gulhane. We will ensure that that is recorded.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Ind)
Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)
Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (Ind)
Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (LD)
Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
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)
Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
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)
McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab) [Proxy vote cast by Michael Marra]
Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)

Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
Russell, Davy (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab)
Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Reform)
Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)

Abstentions

Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Gallacher, Meghan (Central 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)
McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S6M-18786, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on changes to the business programme, is: For 87, Against 0, Abstentions 25.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees—

(a) to the following revisions to the programme of business for Wednesday 10 September 2025—

after	
followed by	Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party Debate: Impact of Accommodating Asylum Seekers on Scottish Local Government
insert	
followed by	Motion on Legislative Consent: Bus Services (No. 2) Bill - UK Legislation
delete	
5.10 pm	Decision Time
and insert	
5.40 pm	Decision Time

(b) that, for the purposes of consideration of the legislative consent memorandum on the Bus Services (No. 2) Bill, Rules 9B.3.5 and 9B.3.6 of Standing Orders are suspended.

The Presiding Officer: The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-18787, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on consideration of a Scottish statutory instrument.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the Social Security (Residence and Presence Requirements) (Miscellaneous Amendment) (Scotland) Regulations 2025 [draft] be considered by the Parliament—[*Jamie Hepburn*].

Motion agreed to.

Decision Time

17:17

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): There are three questions to be put as a result of today's business. I remind members that if the amendment in the name of Sue Webber is agreed to, the amendment in the name of Claire Baker will fall.

The first question is, that amendment S6M-18763.1, in the name of Sue Webber, which seeks to amend motion S6M-18763, in the name of Fiona Hyslop, on 20 years of Scotland's railway providing a strong platform for the future, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (LD)
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)
MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Reform)
Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD) [Proxy vote cast by Willie Rennie]

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)
Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)
Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (Ind)
Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (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)
Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab) [Proxy vote cast by Michael Marra]
Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
Russell, Davy (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab)
Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)

Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)

Abstentions

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Ind)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-18763.1, in the name of Sue Webber, is: For 32, Against 80, Abstentions 1.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S6M-18763.3, in the name of Claire Baker, which seeks to amend motion S6M-18763, in the name of Fiona Hyslop, on 20 years of Scotland's railway providing a strong platform for the future, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

The vote is closed.

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Ind): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I was unable to vote. I would have voted no.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Balfour. We will ensure that that is recorded.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. Beatrice Wishart's proxy vote was not recognised. She would have voted yes.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Rennie. I will ensure that that has been recorded.

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I voted yes, but my app is displaying the message:

"The item is ready to be voted on."

I want to check that my vote has been counted.

The Presiding Officer: I can confirm that your vote has been recorded.

For

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)
Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (LD)
Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab) [Proxy vote cast by Michael Marra]
Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Russell, Davy (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab)
Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD) [Proxy vote cast by Willie Rennie]

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)
Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Ind)
Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
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)
Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)

McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Reform)
Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-18763.3, in the name of Claire Baker, is: For 23, Against 89, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S6M-18763, in the name of Fiona Hyslop, on 20 years of Scotland's railway providing a strong platform for the future, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

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)
Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (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)
Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (Ind)
Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (LD)
Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
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)
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)
McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba)
Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (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)
Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD) [Proxy vote cast by Willie Rennie]

Against

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)
Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
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)
Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab) [Proxy vote cast by Michael Marra]
Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Russell, Davy (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab)
Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Reform)
Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

Abstentions

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Ind)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S6M-18763, in the name of Fiona Hyslop, is: For 69, Against 44, Abstentions 1.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament recognises that it is now 20 years since the devolution of executive powers over rail funding, specification and strategy for Scotland's railway; celebrates the 15th anniversary of the completion of the Airdrie-Bathgate route, instigated by the Labour and Liberal Democrat coalition and completed under the Scottish National Party, the 10th anniversary of the reopening of the Borders Railway and the first anniversary of the reopening of the Levenmouth route; recognises the many significant achievements over those 20 years, including electrification of over 570 kilometres of track, the opening of 30 new stations, and an increase of a fifth in ScotRail passenger numbers; welcomes the consistent delivery of operational performance and passenger satisfaction under public ownership and control, which are among the best levels in Britain; notes the need to continue to improve those performance levels; welcomes the investment of £13 billion over this period to sustain and grow the network through value-for-money projects, including the complete renewal of the Caledonian Sleeper fleet and operation; notes the cross-party support for the removal, for good, of ScotRail peak fares, first piloted while Scottish Green Party ministers were part of the Scottish Government; looks forward to the benefits from developments such as the completion of the electrification of the East Kilbride route, and the progression of procurement of new train fleets and further electrification, including the recently announced Fife and Borders routes; recognises that the UK Government's current proposals for rail reform draw heavily on the widely recognised success of the devolved approach to rail in Scotland; notes the Scottish Government's position that full devolution of rail is the optimal position but, in the absence of full devolution, Scotland's railway must benefit at least as much from those reforms as is promised for England and Wales, and agrees that any reforms that would diminish the Scottish Ministers' powers and the role of the Scottish Parliament already constrained by current UK legislation would be unacceptable to the Scottish Parliament, given the success the delivery model in Scotland has produced over the last two decades.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Residential Outdoor Education

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-18576, in the name of Liz Smith, on celebrating residential outdoor education for young people. The debate will be concluded without any question being put. I invite members who wish to participate to press their request-to-speak buttons now.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament recognises what it sees as the outstanding contribution of Scotland's residential outdoor education centres, including PGL Dalguise in the Mid Scotland and Fife region, in developing key life skills for young people, including confidence, independence, teamwork and resilience; considers that the will of the Parliament has been expressed on the Schools (Residential Outdoor Education) (Scotland) Bill, with a majority of MSPs, including those representing all political parties, agreeing to the general principles at stage 1 on 27 March 2025; notes that the Scottish Government must lodge a financial resolution by 26 September 2025 or the Bill falls; further notes that the Member in Charge of the Bill has produced a series of policy proposals and associated costings for consideration by the Scottish Government that, it believes, would mean the Bill would cost significantly less; understands that the Scottish Government is yet to provide a view on any of these policy proposals and that it is yet to identify at what level of cost it considers the Bill would become "affordable" to enable a financial resolution to be lodged; further understands that the Scottish Government has not produced financial modelling with associated draft amendments on any proposals on affordability despite what it considers a commitment from the Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise when appearing before the Education, Children and Young People Committee to share draft amendments with the Member in Charge by the start of July 2025; notes the calls by members from all political parties, the outdoor education sector, and children and young people from across Scotland for the Bill to proceed to stage 2 for further scrutiny, and further notes the associated calls for a financial resolution to be lodged.

17:25

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I begin by thanking all those in the outdoor education sector for their outstanding commitment to our young people and for their unrelenting support throughout the passage of the Schools (Residential Outdoor Education) (Scotland) Bill to date. In particular, I thank Nick March, Martin Davidson and Phil Thompson, who have been with me on this journey for three years.

I start with PGL Dalguise in my region. In a particularly busy summer recess during which I visited several of our outdoor centres, I found that the focus was very much on inclusion and on the delivery of quality services for all our young people, including those with disability. While I was there, I saw remarkable outdoor climbing facilities and improvements across the board in accommodation for those with additional support needs. The same was true at the wonderful new facilities at Loch Eil. Indeed, everywhere that I went, I found that there was the strongest possible desire to support young people, who would not otherwise get the opportunity for such an experience should those facilities not be there.

I want to make it abundantly clear why I am so frustrated by the Scottish Government's persistent intransigence on residential outdoor education and why I felt compelled to lodge the motion for debate.

First, the Scottish National Party's 2021 manifesto, similarly to those of the other parties, said:

"Learning outside the classroom is an essential part of education. Children should not miss out simply because their parents cannot afford the cost. We will support schools to provide inclusive trips and activities for all and ensure consistent practice across Scotland. And going forward we will ensure that less-well off families do not face costs for curriculum related trips and activities and that all pupils are able to attend 'rite of passage' trips, such as P7 residentials."

That is in the SNP's manifesto.

Secondly, there is a growing and overwhelming body of evidence from young people themselves about the benefits of residential outdoor education. Those views have been rehearsed many times in the chamber and at the Education, Children and Young People Committee, and they are cited in the many letters from young people to MSPs; they relate especially to improving attainment at school, attendance levels, behaviour and mental welfare. Where on earth, then, is the logic of not pursuing the bill, at a time when many schools are suffering from weak attainment and attendance levels, poor behaviour and a deterioration in pupils' mental wellbeing?

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind): Will the member take an intervention?

Liz Smith: I will, in a minute.

Thirdly, given that the bill had been passed at stage 1, the Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise made commitments on the record at the Education, Children and Young People Committee that she would—like me—lodge suggested amendments at stage 2, and that she would bring forward what the Scottish Government saw as an affordable bill. None of that has happened, which is why the minister has been recalled to the committee tomorrow.

Fourthly, if the minister were to allow the bill to fall, it would be the only time in the history of the Scottish Parliament when a bill had passed at stage 1, but the Government of the day sought to undermine the will of Parliament by refusing to lodge a financial resolution. I ask not just the

minister but the Parliament to reflect on that, because—to be frank—it is undemocratic.

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): Will the member give way?

Liz Smith: Yes, I will.

Martin Whitfield: In a very articulate opening to her speech, does Liz Smith not capture, in a nutshell, the essential point here: that the Scottish Government is undermining the will of the Parliament?

Liz Smith: Yes, absolutely. The bill passed comfortably at stage 1, with members—including several SNP members—wanting it to progress to stage 2 so that the technical details could be further pursued.

Again, I thank colleagues across the chamber, whether they are in the SNP, the Greens, the Labour Party, the Conservatives—like those of us on this side of the chamber tonight—or the Liberal Democrats. I thank individuals such as Pam Duncan-Glancy, Martin Whitfield, Ross Greer, Fergus Ewing, Willie Rennie and Jamie Greene, and several other members, along with the Education, Children and Young People Committee and its convener, Douglas Ross.

John Mason: Will the member give way?

Liz Smith: Yes, I will.

John Mason: Would the member accept that the key problem here is finance? She wants to make outdoor residential education a universal benefit, which would cost somewhere in the region of £30 million. That is the problem. If the provision in the bill was targeted, there might be more support for it.

Liz Smith: Mr Mason, if you have been reading the submissions to the Education, Children and Young People Committee—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Through the chair, please, Ms Smith.

Liz Smith: Perhaps the member will be able to see from those submissions that I have reduced the cost of the bill quite substantially and ensured that it is a targeted in a way that I think would benefit those who are most in need.

In case the minister is in any doubt about this at all, I stress that the idea that the stage 1 vote reflected agreement among members across the chamber to implement some kind of non-statutory or pilot measure is incorrect. Members understood that other, non-statutory policy initiatives in the past have not worked—as Willie Rennie quite rightly, and articulately, pointed out in committee evidence, they have not been working for a long time.

I need not remind members of my view that, if the Scottish Government does not act now to enable legislation on something that is proven to have such a positive impact on so many youngsters, that is tantamount to failing them.

The United Kingdom Government, on the other hand, understands the urgency. That was exemplified in August by the Prime Minister's unveiling of an £88 million investment for high-quality extracurricular activity, including outdoor education, to rebuild confidence and reconnect young people with the world around them. Young Scots must not be left behind because of inaction from the Scottish Government.

During our meetings, the minister asked me to present ways in which the cost of the bill could be reduced before a resolution would be considered. I did so, and—as I have explained—I made targeted adjustments, in particular around age groups and additional support needs. By refining the cost estimates and focusing support on primary school children who are eligible for free school meals or whose families receive the Scottish child payment, the bill would continue to deliver for those who are most in need, with a significantly reduced funding model.

The Scottish Government, however, has not kept its side of the bargain by telling me what it would see as an affordable bill; by bringing forward potential amendments for stage 2, which the minister promised to do at the Education, Children and Young People Committee; or by declaring an official position on any of my alternative funding proposals.

All I hear is that the bill is not affordable, yet when it comes to spending money, the Scottish Government is content to spend hundreds of millions of pounds on the ferry fiasco or on meeting the costs of delayed discharge. In addition, if *The Scotsman* newspaper's reports are anything to go by, the Government does not see the need to recoup £36 million in Social Security Scotland overpayments.

As we all know, politics is all about choices and priorities—that is any Government's prerogative. What I do not understand in this case is why the minister has chosen to isolate herself from the rest of Parliament and from the outdoor education sector, particularly given the commitment that the SNP made in 2021.

In winding up, I will finish with one straightforward question, which I urge the minister to answer in her speech at the end of the debate. Will the Scottish Government finally lodge the financial resolution before the deadline of 27 September—yes or no?

If the minister is just playing for time, hoping that the bill will fall without a fight, she misunderstands

not only Parliament, but—just as worryingly—our schools and our education system, which is allegedly built on the principles of inclusion, fairness and opportunities for levelling up, and on building much-needed resilience in our young people.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I advise members that there is a lot of interest in participating in the debate. I want to get every member who has pressed their request-to-speak button in, but I will require members to stick to their speaking time allowance.

We move to the open debate.

17:33

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): I thank Liz Smith for bringing the debate to the chamber. From my involvement with the cross-party group on outdoor education, I can attest to the fact that she is a very committed and incredibly hard-working advocate for outdoor learning. I think that we in the chamber all know that, but it is important that we say such things across parties and give credit where credit is due.

Outdoor education is a powerful and proven way of enhancing young people's learning experiences, broadening their horizons and supporting their wellbeing. When the stage 1 debate on the bill was held in the chamber last March, members heard that spending time in nature has been found to ease anxiety, lower stress and alleviate symptoms of depression, while also boosting mood and promoting overall wellbeing, which is important for our children in this digital age. In addition to those health benefits, outdoor experiences give children valuable opportunities to build essential life skills such as communication, problem solving, teamwork and confidence.

Teachers have also contributed to the discussion and shared their understanding that outdoor learning strengthens classroom engagement, supports social connections and allows children to push beyond their comfort zone. It helps children to grow their independence and face challenges in a safe, structured setting. That approach reflects a broader understanding of the importance of holistic education: one that nurtures both academic success and student wellbeing.

The Scottish Government has long recognised the value that outdoor education can bring, and opportunities are already being supported through established initiatives such as the Scottish attainment challenge and pupil equity funding. Those measures provide schools and communities with the flexibility and resources to ensure that young people, in particular those from disadvantaged backgrounds, can access enriching outdoor learning experiences. Importantly, that support does not depend on the passing of new legislation; it is embedded in current practice and can be developed further within the existing framework. I see in my constituency that different schools are trying different approaches to outdoor learning.

It is also important to recognise that work in this area has been conducted over many years and continues to evolve. Improvements to our outdoor education provision can and should continue, but not exclusively through legislation. Schools, local authorities and community partners are already making strides, and there is scope for them to build on that progress without the need to introduce any legislation as such.

While I welcome the passion behind the proposals—as I mentioned, I truly understand the amount of work that Liz Smith has put into the bill—the financial realities must be acknowledged. I am not taking a view on what Liz Smith has outlined just now, but those realities need to be acknowledged. Opposition parties have been persistent in their calls for the Scottish Government to provide additional funding or reallocate existing funds to cover the measures that are set out in the bill, but there has been no clear indication of where those funds should come from. If cuts are to be made to existing budgets, where should they be made? However, I hear what Liz Smith has said today: that she has cut the bill's proposed financial resources. Again, that is to her credit.

That notwithstanding, I remain a strong believer in outdoor education. I want to put on record something that I have discussed in the chamber previously. Five years ago, I raised my strong objections to the closure of Kilbowie outdoor centre in Oban, which provided week-long residential courses for primary 7 pupils in North Lanarkshire and allowed them to try a range of water sports and adventure activities.

The closure of that facility was a great loss to North Lanarkshire's young people and truly deprived them of their opportunity to flourish in an outdoor learning environment away from home. It was met with real opposition from local people. The closure of the outdoor centre meant that, for some children in my constituency and across North Lanarkshire, their only chance of experiencing a holiday or outdoor recreation was ultimately removed.

I understand the Scottish Government's concerns around the finances, but we need to ensure that another Kilbowie situation does not happen in another area, and perhaps bits of the bill could prevent that from happening.

I thank Liz Smith for bringing the debate to the chamber and for introducing the bill to Parliament, but we need to look at the financial aspects, and I know that the Government minister will talk about that in summing up.

17:38

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I congratulate Liz Smith on the way that she has introduced the debate and on the motion that we have in front of us, which is very strong—and it is strong for a reason. I also credit her for the way that she has taken the bill through Parliament over the past three years, for what she has achieved to date and for what I hope that she achieves in the future.

I think that Liz Smith will be held up as an example for future parliamentarians in future sessions of Parliament of how a non-Government member can take the nucleus of an idea and bring it forward in a bill that can command significant cross-party support.

That is exactly what a non-Government bill should do. It should be about looking at an area where we can improve things and where we can improve people's lives and opportunities—in this case, for young people. It should involve taking on board suggestions from others in an area where the Government has decided that it is not going to legislate, and doing all the hard work—the hard graft—that is involved.

I know that Liz Smith has previously thanked the members of the non-Government bills unit—who do not, I think, get enough praise in the Parliament—for what they have done to get the bill to this stage. As someone who also has a non-Government bill currently going through Parliament, I think that Liz Smith is an excellent example of how members should be impassioned, determined and forthright in their views to get legislation on to the statute book. That is why I share her frustration and disappointment that we are here again this evening.

As convener of the Education, Children and Young People Committee, I sat through all the sessions in which we scrutinised the bill, and I heard almost nothing but praise for it. Some people raised concerns, as John Mason did regarding finance; I will come to that in a moment. However, when people simply looked at what the bill seeks to do, how it seeks to do it and the opportunities that it provides, they saw that it is about literally breaking down barriers. At present, not enough young people have the opportunity to benefit from residential outdoor education. As we have heard, however, for those who have that opportunity, it can make a huge difference to their school life.

Fulton MacGregor spoke about choices having to be made and making cuts to take money from elsewhere. Personally, I think that the bill is an example of a spend-to-save approach. Spending money in this area can create the opportunities that young people need and provide the positive benefits that will, as we heard in committee from teachers and educationists, be delivered by taking a universal approach

There is a dichotomy, in my view: I think that £30 million is a lot of money, but I also think that it is a drop in the ocean for a Government that has hundreds of millions—billions—of pounds to spend. I echo Liz Smith's point that it is about choices. It is about the Government choosing to support the residential outdoor education sector, to support the campaigners who want the bill to pass and to support young people, now and in the future, to get the opportunities that we all know that they need and deserve.

John Mason: As well as the financial aspects, there is the question of teachers. If the provision of residential outdoor education becomes a statutory duty, would they be required to go?

Douglas Ross: We looked at that point in committee and, again, I felt some unease at the minister's response, which was to say that Liz Smith, as the member in charge of the bill, should go to the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and negotiate teacher contracts in that respect.

It is a tripartite issue that can—I hope—be resolved. We heard from teachers who were very positive about their experiences of outdoor education, and I think that that aspect can be developed as the bill develops.

At present, however, we have a chopping block—a knife is going to come down on the bill in just a few days' time, unless the minister, who I see as the roadblock to the legislation, takes a decision. I hope that she responds positively to Liz Smith's question, because it is now on the Government. The Government can either take the approach that, as the Parliament has supported the bill at stage 1, it will support a financial resolution, or it can take the unprecedented—and, I think, dangerous—step of refusing to allocate funding to a bill that would make a huge difference.

I hope that we get an answer tonight. If we do not, I assure the minister that she will be questioned on it in committee first thing tomorrow morning.

17:42

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): I thank Liz Smith for securing the debate and for all the hard work that she has put into bringing the

Schools (Residential Outdoor Education) (Scotland) Bill to Parliament. Like most of the members who have spoken so far tonight, most of those who gave evidence to the Education, Children and Young People Committee and those who have had the opportunity to enjoy outdoor education, I remember my own school residential fondly. My classmates went canoeing and climbing, and my school designed an accessible drama residential for me and some fellow classmates.

I loved it—we had fun, we learned and, crucially, it helped my peers to see that I was just like them. It also showed that action to make participation equal is possible: it needs thought, planning and support, but it can, and should, happen. Everyone should have the opportunity to get everything that they can out of our education system, and outdoor education is a key part of that. It supports resilience, nourishes friendships and encourages confidence and independence, and it has been shown to improve attainment.

I also, therefore, thank the residential outdoor education centres across Scotland that give pupils structured time away from the classroom to do that work: to grow their confidence, to work with others and to try things that they would not otherwise have the opportunity to do. I thank them for the work that they are doing to improve accessibility across all of their estate.

As I will go on to say, the committee heard great evidence of the work that is being done, and we were inspired by the work that could yet be done if the bill were to progress. I am, therefore, concerned—as other members who have spoken this evening have said—by the fact that the Government has not yet provided a financial resolution for Liz Smith's bill. A failure to provide one by the 26 September deadline would be an abdication of responsibility to the Parliament and to our young people by the Government, which appears to be using parliamentary processes to stifle the progress of a bill that Parliament wants to be considered, debated and progressed.

The Government's failure to provide a financial resolution would mean not judging the bill on merit; rather, it would mean expiry by inaction, and our young people deserve better than that. The case for proceeding is practical and evident, and Parliament wants it to happen.

School attendance has dipped in too many places; engagement is fragile; staff are dealing with behaviour pressures; and support for children to deal with everyday life is shrinking by the day. A well-run residential is not a cure-all, and Liz Smith knows that I think that there is still work to do on certain aspects of the bill to maximise its potential—work that I believe can and should be done at stage 2. However, I am clear that the bill is a credible lever to address issues in schools and deliver opportunity for all by building trust, reconnecting pupils with learning and giving them motivation and momentum that carry back into the classroom.

There is clear support for the bill from members across the chamber. The Parliament wants the bill to progress, and it is time that the Government made its position clear, too.

Stage 2 is where Parliament can settle the details that matter on the ground—for example, how any duty is introduced; how safeguarding and ratios are specified; how transport and accommodation are organised; and, crucially, how pupils with additional support needs participate on equal terms, with accessible activities as standard, the right support in place and funding routes that schools can actually use. We are ready and willing to debate, negotiate and resolve all those issues at stage 2, if the Government makes its position clear and does the right thing.

As I have said, my support for the bill is deeply personal to me—it is shaped not just by my personal experience and the fact that I know what can be achieved by the provision of outdoor education that is accessible to all, but by the experiences that I have heard about in committee.

When I was young, I found it difficult to stay over with friends—many of them did not live in accessible houses. That is fine, but a residential gave me that opportunity. I thank the member for her bill, which is a constructive and impressive contribution. The sector has engaged in good faith, and young people have made it clear what residential outdoor education means for them.

Parliament has asked to get on with the scrutiny, and we now call on the Government to deliver on what has been asked of it. A bill that has been backed at stage 1 should not be denied progression simply because the Government is basically not happy to put its money where its mouth is when Parliament has asked it to act. That is weak government, in fact. If the Government has reservations about the detail, it should negotiate on the bill at stage 2, as the rest of us will have to do, rather than frustrate the right of us all to scrutinise it. The Government must now bring forward the financial resolution, put the figures on the table and allow the bill to progress.

17:47

Annabelle Ewing (Cowdenbeath) (SNP): I, too, congratulate Liz Smith on securing a members' business debate on the subject of residential outdoor education for young people. As has been highlighted by other members who have contributed to the debate thus far, residential outdoor education is a hugely rewarding

experience for young people. As we have heard, it contributes to building self-esteem, self-reliance and leadership skills, encourages teamwork and self-confidence and helps to improve attainment.

Residential outdoor education supports the ethos of curriculum for excellence and sits well with the getting it right for every child principles. The wider societal benefits are axiomatic and are fully in line with the Christie principles on preventative spend. I urge the minister to reflect on the importance of those principles as we talk about difficult budgetary issues.

While it is fair to say that some progress has been made since the Scottish Government set out its vision for outdoor learning in 2010, the fact of the matter is that access to residential outdoor education provision remains unequal across Scotland. Ensuring equal opportunity is the key objective of the bill that Liz Smith has proposed, and I was, therefore, very happy to support it at stage 1 in March this year.

At that time, the minister promised Parliament that she would act in good faith and seek "to work with" the member to find a way forward, taking into account the various challenges that the Education, Children and Young People Committee highlighted in its stage 1 report. Those included issues regarding funding, the impact on teachers and the universality of application.

I am aware that, in the intervening period, with regard to the important issue of funding, for example, the member has highlighted potential alternative models of funding for consideration. I note also from what she has said this evening that she has, at the same time, proposed a more targeted approach, thereby reducing the overall level of funding that would be required.

Where matters stand with respect to those discussions is not clear to me, and nor is the extent to which the Government has, in fact, actively worked at pace with the member over the intervening months to explore solutions. As we have heard, there is very little time for the Government to lodge a financial resolution. Surely, if good faith is to prevail here, a financial resolution should be lodged so that the bill can proceed to stage 2. That is, after all, what the Parliament voted for at stage 1. It would allow members to lodge amendments to get the bill over the line while meeting the legitimate concerns that have been raised. I believe that, in that respect, there is cross-party support for trying to find workable solutions. Inaction will not do young people across Scotland any favours, nor will kicking the can down the road.

I have seen at first hand the importance of access to outdoor residential education, in the shape of a stay at Outward Bound's centre at Loch Eil that is offered to pupils who are participating in the Mark Scott leadership for life award scheme. As the former Minister for Community Safety and Legal Affairs, I met young people who were participating over three years and saw how transformational the experience was for them. Although I am always full of admiration for Mark's parents and all those who are involved, at the time I felt that it was a great pity that our Government did not consider that it had a key role to play in ensuring that all young people have the same opportunities, irrespective of where in Scotland they live.

I therefore urge the minister to do the right thing, the bold thing and the fair thing, which is to lodge a financial resolution so that the bill can proceed to stage 2 for further detailed scrutiny.

17:51

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (LD): I pay tribute to Liz Smith not just for securing tonight's debate, but for her relentless work on this issue. It is a true passion for Ms Smith, and it is a worthy passion. I supported the general principles of her bill when I sat next to her on the Conservative benches, and I still support those general principles today.

I also pay tribute to the amazing residential centres right across Scotland, particularly those that are in my region—the two on Arran, the Field Studies Council centre in Millport and the others in neighbouring Dunoon. They offer extraordinary potential for the young people in my region, particularly those who have hitherto had little opportunity to experience the outdoors and active education.

I spoke in the stage 1 debate on the bill. As many others did, I talked about my experiences and about why the bill matters, and those arguments are just as relevant today. However, today's debate is different for three reasons. The first of those is the urgency of the matter and the timescales that we are looking at. The second is the process that is involved. Let us not forget that the Parliament has a three-stage process for making legislation, including members' bills, and it is absolutely right and proper that we give such bills the opportunity to progress. The third reason is the will of Parliament and Government. Where is the will in Government to progress the legislation? I have a horrible feeling that it does not exist any more, because the good faith that was promised after stage 1 has yet to come to fruition.

In March this year, 64 members of the Parliament voted in favour of the bill at stage 1 and only one voted against it. That was a powerful endorsement of the general principles of the bill and the aim that every young person, no matter

what their background, should have a guaranteed opportunity of a residential outdoor experience. I would go so far as to say to the minister that, if we held that vote today, the motion on the bill would pass again, which would tell the Government exactly what it needs to hear.

If the bill falls because the Government does not lodge a financial resolution, it will not be because the Parliament rejected it; it will be because the Government is not willing to negotiate in good faith to allow it to go through the process that it should be afforded. In fact, as Liz Smith said, it would be the first time in the Parliament's history that a bill was vetoed after stage 1 by process. That would be a betrayal of the Parliament, of the young people who would benefit from the legislation and of the outdoor education sector, which absolutely backs the bill. Let us not forget that it was the Government's own promise to commit to the legislation. The question is not just about whether there is political consensus, which I think there is; the question is whether the Government is walking away from its own pledges and manifesto commitments.

Of course, we can talk about affordability—every policy comes with a price tag—but, as Douglas Ross said, the proposals and the revised costings are a drop in the ocean and a small price to pay when we consider the benefits. The Government can disagree with the figures that have been proposed, but it is incumbent upon the Government to come back with alternative proposals, to do its own modelling and to lodge a financial resolution that will allow the bill to progress to the next stage. The bill might fall at stage 3—who knows what will happen at that point?—but let us at least have that debate and give the bill its due process.

Outdoor education improves confidence, boosts attainment and supports wellbeing. It helps to prevent future challenges in health, justice and social care. As we all know, that is backed by evidence: every £1 that is invested in outdoor education saves £3 to £5 in other areas of the public sector. That is an investment in our children's future and it is smart public spending.

The Government faces a simple choice: to let the bill fall and disrespect the will of Parliament or to prove to Scotland's youth and our outdoor education sector that it supports them. I make a plea to the Government today: listen to the will of the Parliament and get on with it.

17:55

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): I, too, thank my friend and colleague Liz Smith for the debate and for her relentless work in developing her member's bill on the promotion of universally available outdoor learning. I am grateful to have the opportunity to speak again on one of my favourite topics.

I will share some of my outdoor learning experiences. At Glaisnock house, during a weekend away to study for O-level geology, we studied the Lugar sill, igneous intrusions and sedimentary rock in the Lugar mine. We learned about limestone pavements, clints and grikes. During a discussion about fossils, when the lecturer asked us what we thought the first living thing on earth was, a student put up her hand and confidently declared that it would have been a brontosaurus. Every time I think about that, I picture the primordial earth with all the ingredients of life waiting to be energised, then, all of a sudden—boom!—a brontosaurus. Every time that I think about that, it makes me laugh out loud.

Deputy Presiding Officer, you might think that that is a bit of a strangled route to an educational benefit, but the point is that that is a shared experience that I remember. Every time that I meet a friend from back then, it always comes up. Yes, we learned what we were supposed to learn in a real, live environment, but we also learned about interaction, camaraderie and making lifelong memories.

I do not necessarily advocate that children and young people should follow our lead in some of our behaviour, but they should have the opportunity to access learning in a variety of ways and create their own great memories from school. Changing the venue and experience can change people's thought process. Not every pupil is at their best when learning in a classroom; when we expand the horizons of learning, bring learning to life and connect with real environments, new opportunities open up for them and their futures. If we offer only a narrow educational path, we will cater only for those for whom that pathway works.

Some elements of education and personal development that are crucial in the classroom are far better learned outside the classroom. We can confidently assert that the challenges of residential courses demonstrate to young people learning skills such as planning, budgeting, leadership, team development, resilience, confidence and managing difficult and real-life situations. That sounds like middle management to me, and we can pay a fortune to attain those skills.

I strongly advocate that, if we are to properly tackle health inequality and the attainment gap, we need to ensure that inequality in access to residential outdoor experiential learning is tackled. My concern is that, like sporting activity, experiential learning is more and more becoming a personal learning and development tool for those who have, to the exclusion of those who have not.

Outdoor residential learning is the absolute epitome of preventative spend and perhaps one of the best ways of investing in our children's experiential learning. Surely, all our children and young people deserve the opportunity to have their own brontosaurus story.

17:58

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): It is normal to start by saying what a pleasure it is to speak in a debate, and it is certainly a pleasure to follow Brian Whittle. I reaffirm my strong support for the Schools (Residential Outdoor Education) (Scotland) Bill, which received the Parliament's backing at stage 1. As we have heard, it carries the hopes of countless young adults, educators, children and outdoor education providers across Scotland. I thank the bill's sponsoring member, Liz Smith, for her tenacity with it and for securing the debate.

The bill is about not just outdoor learning but equity—ensuring that every child, regardless of background, has the opportunity to experience the confidence, resilience and teamwork that residential outdoor education uniquely provides—yet I am deeply concerned that, despite the clear will of the Parliament, the Scottish Government's lack of engagement is putting the bill at risk. That is why it is not my usual pleasure to speak in the debate.

In a meeting that was held on 12 August, and as has been confirmed in a letter from Liz Smith, it was made clear that the Government has no position on the revised policy proposals, including limiting the bill to primary pupils or targeting provision to those who are experiencing poverty or who have additional support needs.

The Scottish Government has not defined what level of cost it would consider affordable. The Scottish Government has not conducted financial modelling on any of the proposals that have been submitted. The Scottish Government has not produced draft amendments, despite making a commitment—a promise; an undertaking—to do so before the Education, Children and Young People Committee.

The Scottish Government is pursuing a non-legislative pilot, with estimated costs of £6 million to £8 million, rather than progressing a bill that has already been endorsed by the Parliament. Crucially, the Scottish Government has not confirmed a date for Cabinet to decide whether to lodge a financial resolution. Promises were made—promises that should be kept.

The bill will fall on 26 September if a financial resolution is not lodged. That is a reality. If that happens, it will be not only a loss for outdoor education but a failure to uphold the democratic will of this Parliament. Let me be clear that the financial resolution process should focus solely on affordability—that is its purpose. Issues of implementation and commencement can and should be addressed at stage 3. The mechanism exists, and the support is there. What is needed is action by the Scottish Government.

I could be cynical and suggest that, if it wanted to, the Scottish Government could still vote the bill down at stage 3, but perhaps that is not as attractive an option as it appears. I highlight to members section 44 of the Scotland Act 1998, which defines membership of the Scottish Government. The First Minister is one of only three core members who are required to constitute a Government—the Lord Advocate and the Solicitor General are the others. That means that those who speak on behalf of the First Minister speak for the First Minister. The undertakings that are given are given for the First Minister, and promises that are made are made for the First Minister, because that is the Scottish Government in the Parliament and in this country.

On 4 September 2024, the First Minister said:

"A quarter of a century after its creation, this Parliament faces some of its toughest tests."

He also said:

"My Government does not command a majority in this Parliament: we have to work with others to make progress on our agenda ... I extend the invitation to colleagues to work together to find that common ground."—[*Official Report*, 4 September 2024; c 23.]

Liz Smith has done more than accept that invitation—she has sought to find common ground, and the Scottish Government has fallen short. The Government has not just set the Parliament a tough test—it is potentially putting itself on a collision course with this place.

I urge the First Minister, through his minister, to honour the commitments that have been made to our young people and to the Parliament on outdoor education, to lodge the financial resolution, to let the bill proceed and to let us do the right thing by the next generation.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: A number of members still wish to participate. I want to include them, but that will require me to ask Liz Smith to move a motion without notice, under rule 8.14.3 of standing orders, to extend the debate by up to 30 minutes. I therefore ask her to move such a motion.

Motion moved,

That, under Rule 8.14.3, the debate be extended by up to 30 minutes.—[*Liz Smith*]

Motion agreed to.

18:03

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in the debate, and I thank Liz Smith for giving us that opportunity.

As a member of the Education, Children and Young People Committee, I have been quite involved in the bill and have heard evidence from a variety of witnesses, including the minister and the member in charge. Some of us from the committee visited Broomlee outdoor centre near West Linton, and I think that most of the committee members stayed at similar centres as youngsters and have spoken about how much they benefited from that. Therefore, it is fair to say that all of us in the committee are enthusiastic about the bill's intentions.

However, there have been key problems with the bill that have prevented me from fully supporting it. One of those issues is money, and another is teachers' terms and conditions. The amount of money could be £30 million, although Liz Smith now says that it could be less, and the Government has said that it could be more.

On the financial side, we presently have a system in which many families are able and willing to pay the full costs. In addition, some schools are able, through fundraising, to support pupils whose families cannot afford the full cost. That in itself can be beneficial, as it involves young people working together to raise the cash that is needed. However, for some schools and some families, that is not an option, and the lack of money prevents them from benefiting from a hugely valuable experience.

My comment on that point is that we do not need legislation to enable all school pupils to go on residential outdoor education trips. What we need is more money. If the Government was able to find a pot of money—maybe £5 million or £10 million—to top up what is currently happening, virtually all pupils would be able to go on such trips. I do not find it acceptable that we should use limited public funds to subsidise well-off families who are currently paying for such trips. Money is tight, and I fear that we need to target funds where the needs are greatest, rather than offer the universal provision that Liz Smith has called for.

Liz Smith: I am grateful to Mr Mason for his engagement on the bill. He has said that he thinks that the Scottish Government should be able to find a pot of money, but I think that that takes away from the argument that he just made. Does he acknowledge that some of the issues to do with costs and staffing could be addressed in the stage 2 process and that, given the commitments that the Scottish Government has made and the fact that the general principles of the bill have been agreed to at stage 1, the first part of the process should be the lodging of a financial resolution?

John Mason: In a word, no. I would have liked it if a compromise could have been reached between Liz Smith and the Government, and I am disappointed that that has not happened.

I voted against the bill because the issue of money is fundamental. We all agree that we would like kids to take part in outdoor education, but money is the fundamental issue. That is why I could not support the provision of £30 million—the figure that was identified—or whatever it might be.

At this morning's meeting of the Finance and Public Administration Committee, Liz Smith questioned the idea of universal provision. Although I would like us to provide outdoor education on a universal basis—that would be ideal—we simply do not have the money to do that.

My other point is that the present model relies heavily on teachers volunteering and going beyond the call of duty in order to take young people away on residential weeks. We have heard from teachers that they and the pupils benefit from that, and that relationships and learning often greatly improve after youngsters have seen their teachers "in their pyjamas". The concern on that point is that a statutory provision whereby all young people were to go on residential visits would lead to an expectation that more teachers would be duty bound to take part in such activities as a requirement of their job. That, in turn, would mean new conditions and new contracts for teachers. We would be best to avoid that can of worms, which I do not believe it is necessary for us to deal with.

My ask is twofold. First, I ask the Government to come up with a reasonable pot of funding, which could be similar to the pupil equity funding money, that could be used to top up the funding that can be raised under the present system. Secondly, I ask Liz Smith, on receiving such a commitment, to drop her plans for the bill, as I fear that legislation in this area, while being very well meaning, would absolutely do more harm than good. My hope is that such a compromise would satisfy the intentions of Liz Smith and Parliament.

18:08

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Reform): It is very difficult for members to get members' bills through this Parliament. It takes a long time and a lot of work. I know that because I have a member's bill that is really up against it time-wise.

However, I am speaking in this evening's debate because I think that it is appalling that Liz Smith

has had to lodge such a motion. We have had the stage 1 debate and we should be proceeding to stage 2. Today's debate is not really about the bill. There was a stage 1 debate in which members spoke passionately about their experiences of outdoor education when they were youngsters. I remember going to a centre that my state school had in the lake district. That gave me my love of the outdoors and hill walking, which has enhanced my life and which I have passed on to my children. Everyone can have a story like that.

We heard all about that at stage 1, when the motion on the bill passed. The issue is not whether it is a good idea or not, because it is—the Parliament has spoken. The issue is the quite extraordinary situation that we are in whereby the Government has not lodged a financial resolution, which could kill off the bill. I find it incredible that the Parliament can vote for a bill at stage 1 and the Government can stop it through process and by playing silly games. That is a disgrace.

Martin Whitfield: This is the first time that this has happened in the history of the Parliament. Is there a danger that the Scottish Government is tempting this to happen in the future, which, in effect, would mean the end of members' bills?

Graham Simpson: Mr Whitfield is quite right. I thought that his contribution to the debate was the most passionate that I have ever heard from him about anything. He gave a fantastic speech because he feels strongly about this. He is absolutely right, as is everyone who has spoken in the debate in support of Liz Smith's bill. We cannot have a situation in which the Parliament votes for a bill at stage 1 only for the Government then to block it without a vote. We have already had the vote, but the Government has blocked the bill, because it will not lodge a financial resolution. That is appalling. If the Government can do that on this occasion, it could do it again and again. I was astonished to find out that it could—perhaps I should have known, because I have a member's bill and I am very concerned that someone might play silly games with it.

The Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise must come clean: she must see that she has a responsibility to the Parliament to lay the financial resolution and accept what the Parliament has already said. If there are problems, they can be ironed out at stages 2 and 3. That is what the process is for; it is not to allow the Government to block things through silly games.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Michael Marra is the final speaker in the open debate—briefly, please.

18:12

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): I appreciate the Presiding Officer accommodating my request to speak at late notice.

My support for Liz Smith's fine work on her member's bill, the Schools (Residential Outdoor Education) (Scotland) Bill, is on record, and I am glad to be able to speak in support of it in the debate. I agree with Mr Simpson that my colleague Martin Whitfield gave a fine speech on the confluence of his two great concerns in life—the rights of children and parliamentary procedure. He is passionate about both, so it is little wonder that he spoke so well.

I will briefly highlight a recent innovation by Dundee City Council—frankly, I will not often say that, as my local authority is not known for innovation. It recently set up a collaboration between Ancrum outdoor centre and Douglaswood scout centre, which is near Dundee and is a place that I know well from my youth. In essence, it has brought home outdoor education for Dundee, as money is spent locally and young people go on trips in the surrounding area. The immediate vicinity of the city has become open to them in a real way. The operation in the new area has been a huge success with schools from Dundee and across Angus, and it is exactly the kind of innovation that the bill could drive forward, so it is important.

I am hopeful that, in her concluding remarks, the Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise will say that we have all been wrong—that this is not the approach that the Government is taking—and will tell us when the financial resolution will be laid. I genuinely hope that that is the case, because, as colleagues have pointed out, the parliamentary process is incredibly important.

John Mason set out a clear and principled position, explaining his financial concerns about the bill. The Government could have taken a similar approach, setting out those concerns at stage 1 and voting against the bill, but it did not. As members have pointed out, it also has the opportunity to vote down or vote against the bill at stage 3, and there will be an opportunity at stage 2 to amend it significantly.

What the Government cannot do is take the cowardly way out of this situation and create a deeply concerning precedent whereby the will of the Parliament is ignored. It cannot purposely find a way around the will of the Parliament by failing, on a point of procedure, to move forward legislation that has been voted for in principle by the Parliament and that should have the Parliament's scrutiny. A failure to allow that would be deeply concerning.

I look forward to hearing the minister's closing remarks, because I genuinely hope that she has listened to the debate tonight, that she will bring the right answer and that she will make sure that the financial resolution comes forward, so that the Parliament's process can be held.

18:15

The Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise (Natalie Don-Innes): I thank all the members who have contributed to today's debate, and I reiterate my recognition of the important role that is played by residential outdoor education in the development of our children and young people. I also thank Liz Smith for her continued work to raise awareness of the importance of residential education.

There are many examples of impactful residential outdoor education and wider outdoor learning provision in the Mid Scotland and Fife region, some of which we have already heard about in the debate. That includes the PGL Dalguise centre, which has outdoor adventure activities that can support the development of key life skills for young people. There are many other examples that are having hugely positive impacts, and I want to be clear that I share the enthusiasm for those.

However, residential experiences may not be suitable for all learners. Therefore, it is important to have other outdoor learning opportunities available for children and young people. Mr MacGregor rightly highlighted the benefits that outdoor learning in all its forms has for children and young people. A good example of that in the region is Fife Council's non-residential outdoor education centre at Lochore meadows, which has a variety of adaptive equipment and accessible facilities for inclusive provision. Fife Council's outdoor learning skills framework sets out how education practitioners can deliver progressive outdoor learning experiences—

Graham Simpson: Will the minister take an intervention?

Natalie Don-Innes: Yes.

Graham Simpson: We do not really need to hear all that. All that we need to know is whether the Government will lay a financial resolution by 26 September.

Natalie Don-Innes: I will be getting on to that—I have a lot to say and now, less time to say it.

Limekilns primary school in Fife demonstrates how localised outdoor learning activities can form part of the regular educational experiences of its pupils. The school has leased a piece of local vacant land that it has turned into a thriving community garden, with each class looking after its own raised bed. The children are outdoors all year round, building strong ties with their community. As the seasons change, they discover new things and get involved in that together.

However, those positive and inspiring examples of how outdoor learning in all its forms is being provided to deliver personal and educational outcomes for pupils are not unique to Mid Scotland and Fife. Staff and learners at Cedarbank, an additional support needs school in West Lothian, have found that a dedicated three-year outdoor learning programme benefits learners and provides rich opportunities to connect with nature, care for living things and develop lifelong skills.

All those examples—I have more, but I want to respond to the points that have been raised in the debate—show that the provision of impactful outdoor learning is already a key part of education and youth work, with or without legislation. They also show that provision is varied, reflecting the diversity of needs among our children and young people. Focusing on only one form of outdoor learning risks overlooking what may work best on the ground and which enabling measures may be the most supportive in continuing to improve that provision.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): I have sat through the whole debate and it all comes down to exactly the point that Graham Simpson made. Will the minister answer the challenge from Graham Simpson? Will she announce the financial resolution—yes or no?

Natalie Don-Innes: I will now respond to some of the points that have been raised in the debate. However, I wanted to cover the general idea of outdoor learning in all its forms.

I recognise the support that has been shown by the Parliament for the general principles of the member's bill at stage 1. Whether the Government will lodge a motion for a financial resolution to the bill is a matter of on-going consideration.

Liz Smith: It is not just a matter of on-going discussions; it is a matter of parliamentary democracy. Does the minister think that it is democratic for a stage 1 debate to be undermined by a Government that is unwilling to lodge a financial resolution after the Parliament has voted in favour of the bill at stage 1?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can give you the time back for the intervention, minister.

Natalie Don-Innes: As I have said, that is still being considered by Government. The financial resolution follows a legitimate and important process that is set out in standing orders to ensure that ministers and Government can exercise their responsibility and accountability for appropriate

management of the Scottish budget. That is not a power or position that is unique to Scotland. I now need to make some progress.

On specific Government proposals relating to Ms Smith's bill, in line with my commitment made at committee on 11 June that I would be happy to discuss proposed amendments, I discussed areas for potential stage 2 amendments with Liz Smith at our meeting on 1 July. At that meeting, she indicated that she would be open to a potentially more targeted approach, which I welcome, as well as to a change in the commencement provisions. However, I have made clear to Ms Smith that, procedurally—

Liz Smith: Will the minister give way?

Natalie Don-Innes: I will just finish this point.

I have made it clear to Ms Smith that, procedurally, we are not at the point at which producing draft legal text of stage 2 amendments is appropriate. Doing so would pre-empt the Government's decision on whether to lodge a motion for a financial resolution, which we will confirm by 26 September.

Liz Smith: Can the minister tell me what the Government's stance is on the proposals that I have brought to the table? That is absolutely essential if we are to move any further on the financial resolution.

Natalie Don-Innes: The proposals that Ms Smith has made are very welcome and have helped to inform the Government's decision on the financial resolution. I have been very clear that I am very thankful for the effort that Ms Smith has made and the ways that she is willing to change aspects of the bill.

Liz Smith: Will the minister give way?

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

On affordability, in the current financial context, introducing new duties to fund forces extremely difficult choices about what to defund in order to accommodate any new expenditure. Even in a targeted form, a potential annual recurring cost of between £15.3 million and £16.8 million would require significant adjustments in the education portfolio budget. I hear what members say about a preventative spend—many aspects of the education portfolio budget are a preventative spend.

Ms Smith has not offered any suggestions about what in education could be stopped in order to preference residential outdoor education when ministers bring forward a budget for Parliament's consideration. That difficulty is compounded by the fact that the total potential costs, which I have discussed with Ms Smith at length, remain unclear, due to gaps in the data available and the assumptions underpinning the proposed delivery approach. I have discussed those issues with the member, and they remain outstanding.

Michael Marra: Will the minister give way?

Natalie Don-Innes: Can I get the time back, Presiding Officer?

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

Michael Marra: The minister makes some legitimate points regarding prioritising spending. That is clear. However, Parliament is saying quite clearly tonight—and it said this at stage 1—that withholding a financial memorandum as part of the process is not a legitimate way for Government to make that decision. It is absolutely essential that we have a financial memorandum so that Parliament can scrutinise it. Anything else would be profoundly undemocratic.

Natalie Don-Innes: I think that I have been clear about the Government's intention to bring forward a decision on the financial resolution.

I will move on to other issues around affordability. Mr Mason rightly brought up the issue of the workforce. I would like to correct Mr Ross. I did not feel that it was Ms Smith's responsibility to negotiate teacher contracts—absolutely not. However, it was reasonable for Ms Smith, who has assumed that teacher participation would continue on a voluntary basis, to meet the unions to listen to their concerns and views on the bill. From my meetings with representatives of the five main professional associations, I have not had assurance on that. It is important that Ms Smith hears from all the stakeholders who would be involved.

I appreciate that time is short, so in concluding I thank Liz Smith again for raising the profile and discussion around residential outdoor education in Scotland.

Martin Whitfield: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I seek your guidance as to the expectation of a financial memorandum, as set out in rule 9.3 of the Parliament's standing orders. My understanding is that it is the responsibility of the financial memorandum to set out

"estimates of the costs, savings and changes to revenues",

rather than, as we have heard from some members in the debate this afternoon, the pros and cons of the bill. Is my understanding of the financial memorandum right? Is it correct to say that those issues are addressed through the financial memorandum, rather than the failure to deliver a motion for a financial memorandum?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I thank Mr Whitfield for his point of order. It will not surprise

him to hear that I wish to reflect on it further before making any substantive response.

I ask the minister to conclude.

Natalie Don-Innes: I was just concluding.

In response to the direct question from Liz Smith on the current member's bill, I assure members that the Government is continuing to carefully consider whether to lodge that financial resolution, and we will confirm our position by 26 September.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Can the minister confirm when the Cabinet will discuss the financial resolution?

Natalie Don-Innes: I cannot confirm that at this point, but I can confirm that I will advise the Parliament of the decision by 26 September.

I appreciate that I have not had time to respond to all the points that have been raised in the debate. I am sure that committee members will have plenty of questions for me in the morning.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate, and I close this meeting of the Parliament.

Meeting closed at 18:25.

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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