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CONTENTS

	Col.
GENERAL QUESTION TIME	1
Wildfire Management Practices (Independent Review)	1
Cervical Cancer Screening	2
M8 Woodside Viaducts	4
Equality Act 2010	5
Largs to Glasgow Central Rail Service	6
Ferguson Marine (Direct Award)	7
Community Council Convention of the Highland Council Area (Unified Statement)	8
FIRST MINISTER'S QUESTION TIME	10
Social Security Spending	10
Alexander Dennis Ltd	12
Ferry Services (Compensation Scheme)	15
Food and Drink Costs (Inflation)	16
Town and City Centres	17
Homelessness (Protection)	19
Scotland's Gaming Industry	21
Warmworks	22
Fire Service Provision (Edinburgh)	23
Whisky Industry (Tariffs)	23
Energy Infrastructure (Community Groups)	24
Care Workers (Enable Scotland)	24
Local Housing Allowance (Rates)	25
Whisky Industry	26
POINT OF ORDER	28
WILDFIRES	29
<i>Motion debated—[Emma Roddick].</i>	
Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)	29
Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)	32
Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP)	34
Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)	35
Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (Ind)	37
Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con)	38
Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green)	39
Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)	41
Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con)	43
Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)	44
Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con)	45
The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie)	47
MOTION OF CONDOLENCE	51
<i>Motion moved—[First Minister]—and agreed to.</i>	
The First Minister (John Swinney)	51
Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)	54
Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab)	55
Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)	57
Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD)	58
PORTFOLIO QUESTION TIME	60
EDUCATION AND SKILLS	60
Education Infrastructure Investment	60
Children (Withdrawal from Religious Education and Amendment of UNCRC Compatibility Duty) (Scotland) Bill	62
“Preaching is not Teaching”	63
Higher Education Sector (Dispute)	64
Additional Support for Learning (Rural Schools)	65
Schools (Residential Outdoor Education) (Scotland) Bill	66

Nursery Mothballing (Guidance).....	68
Construction Sector (Training and Apprenticeships).....	69

Scottish Parliament

Thursday 18 September 2025

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

General Question Time

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

Wildfire Management Practices (Independent Review)

1. Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (Ind): To ask the Scottish Government, in light of reports that the worst wildfires ever recorded in Scotland affected the areas around Dava, Lochindorb and Carrbridge this summer, what discussions the rural affairs secretary has had with ministerial colleagues regarding potentially commissioning an independent review of wildfire management practices. (S6O-04946)

The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie): I, alongside the Minister for Victims and Community Safety, will host a wildfire summit on 14 October. The focus will be on wildfire prevention measures, the response to recent wildfires and the appropriateness of our resources and our deployment. All key stakeholders will be invited to attend and input to the discussion. Furthermore, the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service is conducting a series of debriefs to help to identify lessons learned from this year's response. We will then consider whether further evidence or advice is required to ensure that we have appropriate mitigation and response plans in place.

Fergus Ewing: Presiding Officer, the question was not answered. Be that as it may, however, the fact is that many deaths that occur in major fires are caused not through the fire itself but through smoke inhalation when people try to flee the fire in vehicles using the road on which they arrived. Two areas in Scotland that have thousands of visitors every day for most of the year are Glenmore and Rowardennan, which both have one road in and one road out.

Does the minister agree that it is essential that, before next Easter, a detailed plan is compiled so that we are in a position to effectively tackle serious fires in such locations? Otherwise, there is a serious risk of catastrophic loss of life. Does he agree that an independent review provides the best way to compile that, rather than having a variety of public bodies marking their own jotters?

Jim Fairlie: Fergus Ewing has already written to me and the community safety minister, Siobhian Brown, to seek a meeting. When we have that meeting, which I have agreed to host, he will be able to raise those individual points about the areas that he is specifically concerned about. However, in relation to the independent review that he talked about, it is more appropriate to ensure that we have the experts in the room—the people who know exactly how to manage wildfires and what wildfire mitigation is—having a proper discussion about how we put resilience into our systems.

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I am interested to hear that the minister will attend a meeting. I wrote to him on 8 August requesting such a meeting and he told me this morning that he is too busy between now and Christmas. Well, there we go.

This year, there have been 62 fires in the Highlands. That is the highest number since five years ago, when there were 85, and we still have a big part of the year to go. In the past 10 years, there have been 570 fires in the Highlands, which represents a third of all fires in Scotland, and it is going to get worse because of things such as the muirburn code. Surely we should have centralised assets, including access to aircraft—fixed wing and rotary—in order to fight fires and save lives, rather than relying on private estates and the will of good neighbours to fight these fires.

Jim Fairlie: In response to the first point that Edward Mountain made, I say that he is absolutely correct. I refused to attend the meeting that he asked for on the basis that we are already planning a number of events in order to get experts in the room who know exactly what they are talking about. As far as our ability to go forward is concerned, that is what those discussions will be about, and I will be more than happy to share information about the discussions with the Parliament as we develop them.

Cervical Cancer Screening

2. Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what action it has taken to ensure that people with increased genetic risk of developing cervical cancer are offered additional screening tests. (S6O-04947)

The Minister for Public Health and Women's Health (Jenni Minto): Scotland's screening policy follows United Kingdom National Screening Committee recommendations. The committee recommends cervical screening for eligible participants every five years. Although it has not recommended additional screening based on genetic considerations, women are offered more frequent screening if their previous result was

positive for human papillomavirus, which indicates that they may be at higher risk. Importantly, where HPV is not detected, evidence strongly suggests a very low risk of developing cancer within 10 years.

Regardless of risk factors, anyone who is experiencing cervical cancer symptoms should not wait for screening but contact their general practitioner immediately. Information on symptoms can be found on NHS Inform.

Fulton MacGregor: At a recent constituency surgery, I met siblings from a family following the death of their dear mother, Lavina Gilfillan, who sadly passed away from cervical cancer. They shared with me that Lavina's sister had been diagnosed with cervical cancer at the age of 21 and subsequently underwent a hysterectomy. Given that significant family history, the family believe that Lavina should have been offered enhanced screening and monitoring, but they state that that did not happen. Instead, she was diagnosed at a later, more advanced stage.

The family are now considering lodging a petition with the Scottish Parliament to call for the introduction of a cervical cancer family risk and genetic screening policy. Such a policy would aim to provide genetic counselling and testing for families with a strong history of cervical cancer; introduce enhanced screening schedules—including earlier start ages—with more frequent smear and HPV testing and access to colposcopy where appropriate; and ensure that healthcare professionals and the public are aware that a family history of cervical cancer should trigger preventative action. I agreed to raise the issue on the family's behalf. I would be grateful if the minister or the cabinet secretary agreed to meet the family.

Jenni Minto: I thank Fulton MacGregor for his follow-up question and send my deepest sympathies to his constituents and the wider family. I fully understand their desire to prevent others from going through what they have been through and I would be pleased to meet them to discuss their proposals. However, I reiterate that our policies must be supported by evidence, and we will always listen to the National Screening Committee and other UK scientific organisations to ensure that we make decisions that are clinically supported. I am happy to discuss that in more detail and to listen to the family.

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): The minister will be aware that, following the tragic death of a constituent of mine, I have been looking into what arrangements are in place to ensure physical access for disabled people—women, in particular—in general practitioner surgeries and elsewhere, so that they can access smear tests and similar screening procedures. I have since heard from GPs that funding for access to and

modernisation of equipment came from the improvement fund, but that has now stopped. Will the minister confirm what support is available to surgeries and other medical treatment facilities to help to ensure that they are accessible to all patients?

Jenni Minto: I very much appreciated the conversation that I had with Pam Duncan-Glancy on that subject. As a result, when I was visiting a gynaecology area in NHS Fife, I recognised the importance of the investment that it had made in specific technology to support women who had additional requirements when being screened. I am happy to follow up Pam Duncan-Glancy's question in writing.

M8 Woodside Viaducts

3. **Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what discussions it has had with Turner & Townsend regarding its role in auditing and monitoring the work undertaken by Amey to complete the M8 Woodside viaducts. (S6O-04948)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): Since May 2023, Turner & Townsend has provided Transport Scotland with commercial assurance and project control support on the M8 Woodside temporary propping project. It is in regular dialogue with the Transport Scotland team and attends frequent project programme boards, at which it provides commentary regarding project progress.

Turner & Townsend reviews and comments on tender submissions from Amey and its subcontractors, reviews cost forecasting and assists Transport Scotland with future budget setting. It inputs to project risk reviews and quantifies a suitable risk allowance to be included in the project cost range.

Pauline McNeill: The cabinet secretary is aware that the completion dates for the M8 Woodside viaduct repairs are currently autumn 2026 for the eastbound carriageway and late 2027 for the westbound carriageway, which is six years since the project began. Further, the budget has gone from £33 million to £152 million.

In 2021, the works were classed as an emergency, which means that there are no penalty clauses for late delivery. How will the Scottish Government ensure that the work is done efficiently and in a timely manner? Can it require Amey to take reasonable steps to accelerate the works, such as paying overtime? Given the nature of the contract—that it has no penalty clauses—what measures can be put in place by the expert group and Turner & Townsend, which is monitoring contract performance, to ensure that

Amey is held to account and that there are no further delays to the repair of the M8 viaducts?

Fiona Hyslop: Clearly, safety is a primary concern, but so are value for money and cost management, which I referred to. Those must be regularly scrutinised and accounted for.

On penalty clauses, I refer Pauline McNeill to the briefing that she and other members received about the challenges that have been faced in 23 locations, which have to be addressed. That includes uncharted obstruction near the Strathclyde Partnership for Transport subway. We would not necessarily expect uncharted or unrecorded obstruction, or obstruction that is recorded in a different area, to be a penalty issue.

I think that everybody understands that the project is difficult and challenging. Pauline McNeill asked whether the work can be accelerated. We will try to do that, particularly in relation to the elements that require more attention because of the intensity of the traffic.

Equality Act 2010

4. Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con):

To ask the Scottish Government whether it has engaged with the Equality and Human Rights Commission in relation to the 19 public bodies and organisations that were found to have misrepresented the Equality Act 2010. (S6O-04949)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): The EHRC has not published the details of, or otherwise informed the Scottish Government about, the 19 organisations that it has written to following its review of evidence from the United Kingdom Government on single-sex-space policies. The review process is a matter for the EHRC in fulfilling its statutory-function role to monitor and enforce compliance with the 2010 act.

Tess White: The Scottish National Party Government has let public bodies break the law, betray women and burn public money. It is defending the indefensible, and that is absolutely shameful. The EHRC has reprimanded 19 organisations for misrepresenting the 2010 act, yet the SNP Government is still peddling guidance that promotes self-identification to schools and prisons. Public bodies are completely at sea because the SNP puts ideology before women's rights. Will the minister be finding out whether any of those organisations are based here in Scotland? Will she and the Government issue a directive to public bodies to follow the law by the end of the year at the latest?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: As I have made clear to the chamber on a number of occasions, the Scottish Government accepts the Supreme

Court judgment, and action is being taken. As well as accepting that judgment, we are moving forward with the detailed work that is necessary as a consequence. I have spoken in detail previously on the working group that is considering that work right across Government. We are not aware of how many of the 19 bodies are in Scotland—that is a matter for the EHRC. We have been clear to public bodies in Scotland that we expect all bodies to follow lawful practice.

The Presiding Officer: Question 5 is from Sandesh Gulhane, who joins us remotely. *[Interruption.]*

We will move on to question 6.

Largs to Glasgow Central Rail Service

6. Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what recent discussions it has had with ScotRail regarding an increase to the service frequency on the Largs to Glasgow Central route. (S6O-04951)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): Transport Scotland officials are in a continuing dialogue with ScotRail and Scottish Rail Holdings to ensure that the services provided by ScotRail meet passenger needs as much as possible. ScotRail has no immediate plans to increase the current service level between Largs and Glasgow Central, as it continues to meet passenger demand and matches the frequency provided prior to the Covid pandemic.

Thanks to the Scottish Government's investment, passengers travelling on the line benefit from the consistently high-performing electrified railway. In addition, commuters are now saving considerable amounts on their travel since this Government's initiative to remove peak fares for good.

Kenneth Gibson: When the Largs line was electrified in 1987, the double track was reduced to a single one, restricting the number of trains that were able to run in each direction. Last year, Largs station served 384,000 passengers—25 per cent more than in the previous year—and numbers are virtually back to pre-Covid levels, while national rail usage still lags behind. There is clearly an appetite for more train travel to Largs, but line infrastructure limits the current service to one train an hour. Will the cabinet secretary press Network Rail and other partners to invest in the branch line to deliver a half-hourly service that better reflects growing demand?

Fiona Hyslop: As I said in my initial answer, the current service level for passengers in Largs is consistent with pre-Covid levels—it meets existing demand. The member clearly makes the case for added infrastructure investment, and, obviously, he knows what we have to prioritise. A

considerable amount of infrastructure investment is already taking place in our railways, within the current budgets. There are no immediate plans to double track the line, which is what would be required to deliver what the member is asking for, but he has made the case and brought the matter to my attention, so I will ensure that my officials discuss it with Network Rail.

The Presiding Officer: As we have been unable to make contact with Dr Gulhane, we will continue to question 7.

Ferguson Marine (Direct Award)

7. Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will make a direct award to the Ferguson Marine shipyard for the replacement of MV Lord of the Isles. (S6O-04952)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): Ministers consider all new vessel projects, including the replacement of MV Lord of the Isles, on a case-by-case basis to determine an appropriate and lawful route to market.

Shipbuilding is a competitive global market. Any direct award of a public contract must comply with applicable procurement and subsidy control rules, and be capable of withstanding legal challenge. The direct award of public contracts is possible only in strictly limited circumstances, and those matters take time to consider. We are considering the business case and the next steps in relation to the replacement of MV Lord of the Isles, and we will confirm those in due course.

Katy Clark: Given that such lifeline ferries are critical infrastructure, will the Scottish Government consider a direct award under section 45 of the Subsidy Control Act 2022? I am sure that the United Kingdom Government would be willing to work with the Scottish Government on that, given that it has already made representations in relation to procurement law.

Alternatively, if the Scottish Government is going to put the contract out to tender, will it look at what is happening in other parts of the UK, where the UK Government is placing a minimum 10 per cent social value weighting element into the assessment of bids for shipbuilding contracts? That is not happening in Scotland, so will the Scottish Government look to include such an element in any tendering process?

Fiona Hyslop: We have social value weighting in our current procurement legislation. I can confirm that we are actively looking at the options of direct award and competitive procurement to determine an appropriate and lawful route for procurement.

It is important that we reference what the islanders think. For a bit of balance, I will quote John Daniel Peteranna from the South Uist business impact group, who said in local media:

“We have every sympathy for the skilled workforce at Port Glasgow, and for the need to sustain shipbuilding on the Clyde. But sympathy cannot come at the cost of island lives, livelihoods, and long-term sustainability. To use our ferry needs as a tool for political point-scoring would send out a deeply damaging message to our communities.”

The tone and context in which Katy Clark asked the question has allowed all members to consider this very important issue and reflect on all the needs of the workforce and the islanders.

The Presiding Officer: I regret that, for connectivity reasons, I am unable to contact and call Sandesh Gulhane. I therefore call Douglas Ross to ask question 8.

Community Council Convention of the Highland Council Area (Unified Statement)

8. Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government, in light of the unified statement agreed at the community council convention of the Highland Council area regarding the impact of major energy infrastructure in the region, in Beauly on 14 June 2025, what the Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Energy’s response is to the statement and whether she will attend a future convention meeting to discuss it. (S6O-04953)

The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie): I point out that I am answering on behalf of the Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Energy.

We are clear that the potential impact of major infrastructure necessitates pre-application consultation and engagement with local communities. The Scottish Government has published good practice guidance on the procedures for applications under sections 36 and 37 of the Electricity Act 1989, which includes information on public consultations. Although the power to mandate community benefits sits with the United Kingdom Government, we continue to press for mandatory provision from mature onshore technologies and a level playing field across the UK to ensure that the energy transition delivers real benefits. Maintaining the standards of the ministerial code for live applications means that Government ministers cannot attend public meetings of that nature.

Douglas Ross: I am sorry, but that is not true and it is not an answer to a very clear question. Can the minister take that back to the cabinet secretary? It does not breach the ministerial code if the cabinet secretary meets and listens to concerns in the Highland Council area, and that is

all that we are asking for. Can the minister pass that on to the cabinet secretary?

Jim Fairlie: I should point out to the member that, as a former UK Government minister, he will know that, when we are looking at specific applications, there are clear guidelines in the ministerial code. However, I will take his point back to the cabinet secretary and she will respond in due course.

First Minister's Question Time

12:01

Social Security Spending

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

The Auditor General today confirms that the Scottish National Party has a £1.2 billion black hole in social security spending for this year alone. The SNP's benefits black hole is going to get even bigger, reaching £2 billion by 2030. The Auditor General says:

"The Scottish Government has not yet set out a detailed strategy for how it will manage the forecast gap between social security funding and spending within its overall budget."

The Government will spend £2 billion a year more on benefits than budgets provide, yet it has no plan to pay for it. Will John Swinney tell us what his plan is, or whether he even has one?

The First Minister (John Swinney): As Mr Findlay knows, the Scottish Government is obliged to balance its budget annually. We have done so on every single occasion since we were elected to serve the people of Scotland in 2007. The issue that Mr Findlay raises essentially comes down to whether we are prepared to follow the benefit policies of the United Kingdom Government, which include making cuts to support for people with disabilities, who are some of the most vulnerable people in our society. My Government will do no such thing.

Russell Findlay: Of course, social security is an essential safety net for every citizen, but it has to be fair and affordable. The SNP has created an agency that takes claimants at face value when it reviews benefit claims. Claimants have only to tick a box on a form that says, "My needs are the same," and that is it.

The Auditor General also says that there is no system to investigate the fraud that is not only inevitable but happening right now. He highlights that

"there is no timescale for when Social Security Scotland can consider incorrect payments due to client error or fraud."

Can John Swinney tell us when those vital checks will be introduced?

The First Minister: One of the facts that Mr Findlay omitted in putting his question was that the Scottish Government, through the establishment of Social Security Scotland, has presided over the safe and effective transfer of personal independence payments to adult disability payments for 350,000 disabled people in Scotland. I take this opportunity to thank the staff of Social

Security Scotland for doing such an excellent job in supporting some of the most vulnerable people in our society.

If errors are made in the system, or if there is evidence of fraud, those issues are already addressed by the systems that Social Security Scotland has in place. Those mechanisms are there to ensure that the public purse is protected and that support reaches those who need it.

One of the undertones of Mr Findlay's question, which he never gets round to answering, is: whose benefits does he want to take away? We hear all his rhetoric, but when it comes down to the hard, specific realities of whose benefits are getting withdrawn, Mr Findlay has no answers.

Russell Findlay: It sounds to me as if John Swinney is saying that the Auditor General is wrong. He is not. It is black and white: there are no systems in place to prevent fraud.

The Auditor General also reveals today that 20 per cent of personal independence payment benefits are reduced or ended following standard review elsewhere in the UK but that, for Scotland's equivalent benefit, that figure is just 3 per cent. Again, that means that, in the words of the Auditor General,

"Social Security Scotland does not have a reliable figure for the amount that is lost to fraud and error."

The SNP's approach is not only naive and negligent; it is a betrayal of those in genuine need and of taxpayers. Can John Swinney tell us how much benefit fraud is taking place, or does he really have absolutely no idea?

The First Minister: Mr Findlay omitted to say in his question that the data about the United Kingdom system shows that a substantial proportion of the cases that he mentions are overturned on appeal. Therefore, the point that he advances is not a valid one to put to me.

As I have indicated to Mr Findlay, the Scottish Government has put in place a system that is designed to meet the needs of some of the most vulnerable people in our society. I think that that is the right purpose for our social security system, which the Government is proud to have in place in Scotland and which is delivering support to almost 350,000 of our most vulnerable citizens.

Russell Findlay: Every week, John Swinney omits to give a straight answer to basic questions.

There are no checks on fraud or error. There is not even a timeline for when checks might be introduced. Scotland's soaring benefits bill is unsustainable, but John Swinney has no plan to pay for it. We are talking about a £2 billion black hole, made by the SNP.

At committee this morning, the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs, Angela Constance, was asked five times how that bill would be paid, and the best answer that she could come up with was that the money would come from "the people of Scotland." That will send a shudder down the spine of every taxpayer in the country. By exactly how much will the SNP raise taxes to pay for its £2 billion benefit black hole?

The First Minister: As Mr Findlay knows, all the issues around tax are dealt with in the budget process, and there will be an opportunity for the Conservatives to engage in that process to discuss those issues. I know that the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government will engage in those discussions constructively, but the Conservatives have to be able to come to them with some proposals. *[Interruption.]*

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): Stop the fraud.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Let us hear one another.

The First Minister: It is not good enough to come here and talk about the soaring benefits bill and then not say whose benefits are going to be taken away.

Members: The fraudsters.

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear one another.

The First Minister: I am certain that the Conservatives will want to do exactly what their London equivalents did: pursue and harass vulnerable people in our society. This Government will not go down that road.

Alexander Dennis Ltd

2. **Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab):** I welcome this week's news about the furlough scheme at the Alexander Dennis bus manufacturing sites in Falkirk and Larbert. That will provide welcome respite for the workforce, and Governments continue to work to secure a future for ADL at those sites. However, what guarantees has the Scottish Government secured that, if contracts come, Alexander Dennis will keep those sites open and maintain the jobs that are currently in Scotland? The Government has now reopened phase 2 of the Scottish zero-emission bus challenge fund with public money, but what guarantees can the First Minister give that that will lead to Scotland's buses being built in Scotland?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I am pleased that Mr Sarwar welcomes the progress that the Scottish Government has made in collaboration with Alexander Dennis and its workforce. I take the opportunity to thank the company and its workforce for engaging substantively with the Deputy First Minister on all

these issues to get to a position in which the Scottish Government has been able to support the company to retain hundreds of manufacturing jobs in Scotland, which is very welcome.

The Government has engaged with the company, and we have put in place the offer of a furlough scheme. The furlough scheme can be activated only if the company demonstrates success in securing orders. There is growing confidence that satisfactory orders will be secured.

In relation to ScotZEB 2, there is a procurement process that must be pursued, and the Government will report to the Parliament on the conclusions of that exercise.

Anas Sarwar: The workforce will want to hear commitments on contracts in Scotland, as well as guarantees from the company in response to the very welcome furlough scheme.

Industrial strategy must be more than simply crisis management. Whether in relation to buses or ferries, we need a joined-up approach. On Monday, the GMB union led calls for the Ferguson Marine yard to receive a direct award for the next ferry for Scotland's fleet. We welcome that call. John Swinney has spoken of his support for the yard, but, when pressed on a direct award, his Government will say only that it is complicated. Guaranteeing a supply of work for that yard is essential to the workers there, but it is also essential to protect taxpayers' investment and to secure those jobs for generations to come. In the spirit of collaboration, what legal advice has John Swinney sought on a direct award of contracts to Ferguson Marine? Will he share any existing legal advice with the Parliament?

The First Minister: I think that Mr Sarwar was in the chamber to hear the Cabinet Secretary for Transport give a detailed response to Katy Clark's question on exactly that: a potential direct award to Ferguson Marine for the contract for the successor to the MV Lord of the Isles. I said on Monday that it is complicated but that the Government is doing the detailed work to enable that to be considered. I give Mr Sarwar the absolute assurance that the Government is strongly engaged in exploring that as a possibility. The transport secretary gave comprehensive details of the work that is under way.

Mr Sarwar will understand that I cannot disclose the legal advice that is available to the Government on this question, because we need to consider all those elements. However, I give him the fundamental assurance that the Government is actively considering such a proposition, along with other propositions, as the transport secretary has set out.

Our work on the contract and continued support for Ferguson Marine is part of a comprehensive

industrial strategy for Scotland, which is essential. We are now getting into territory in which more progress is being made on manufacturing opportunities in Scotland. I welcome that, and the Government is committed to making that happen. Our agencies, whether that is Scottish Enterprise, Transport Scotland or any other bodies, are actively engaged in that work.

Anas Sarwar: We need a more coherent industrial strategy, whereby we build our vital infrastructure here in Scotland. That means building buses in Scotland so that Scottish companies can thrive, and it means building ferries in Scotland so that Scottish shipyards can thrive. However, under the Scottish National Party, we have had buses for Scotland built in China while Scotland's bus companies struggle, and ferries built in Turkey and Poland while Scotland's shipyards go without.

I am clear that a Scottish Labour Government that I lead will build Scotland's buses, ferries and other crucial infrastructure right here in Scotland. *[Interruption.]* Will John Swinney make that same commitment and stop sending—

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear one another.

Anas Sarwar: SNP members do not want to hear it, Presiding Officer.

Will John Swinney make that same commitment to stop sending public contracts to Poland, China and Turkey and give those jobs to Scotland?

The First Minister: I am sorry to break some sombre news to Mr Sarwar, but, when the Labour Party was the leading party in the Scottish Executive, it sent contracts for ferries to Poland and to other European countries. Mr Sarwar will have to check up on his history—

Anas Sarwar: I was at school.

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear one another.

The First Minister: He will have to check up on the history of the performance of the Labour Government. If people want to know what a Labour Government might be like, they need only look at the shambles that was in here before us and the shambles that is in place in the United Kingdom at present.

I am all for buses being built in Scotland. I am all for ferries being built in Scotland—

Anas Sarwar: When?

The Presiding Officer: Mr Sarwar.

The First Minister: I am all for developing the skills to make sure that we can do that, and I am all for ensuring that we invest to make that

happen. That is what I was doing this week—making sure that that is likely to happen—and I am proud of that record for the people of Scotland.

Ferry Services (Compensation Scheme)

3. Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): The Scottish Government's ferry fiasco is a national embarrassment. It has cost us a fortune, but no Scottish National Party minister has ever had the decency to resign. Scottish Liberal Democrats have been arguing for years that islanders and coastal communities deserve compensation for the colossal disruption to their lives. Now, the Scottish Government has belatedly set up a scheme, but far too many are excluded from it. Why do businesses on Mull, Iona, Coll, Tiree, Islay and Jura all get absolutely nothing?

The First Minister (John Swinney): First, I accept that there has been disruption to ferry services in Scotland. We are working hard to replace the fleet. As Mr Cole-Hamilton will know, one of the large vessels is now in service, another is being finished at the Ferguson Marine yard, and four further vessels are coming from the Cemre yard in Turkey. That will give us six new vessels for the fleet in the current period—those contracts are taking their course—which will strengthen the ferry network.

The Government has put in place a compensation scheme that examines the degree of disruption in different island communities and considers where that disruption has been acute and where the delivery of payments is merited. In the islands that Mr Cole-Hamilton has cited, the level of disruption has not been comparable with the level in areas with more significant disruption. That is the judgment that has been applied by ministers in putting in place a compensation scheme, and we discuss and consider such schemes with the relevant island communities.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: The First Minister should tell that to the communities that have seen their timetables altered to hide the cancellations. That is “unfair, arbitrary and divisive”. That is what Joe Reade from Island Bakery on Mull says about the scheme, and that is what everyone in excluded communities thinks.

The Scottish Liberal Democrat consultation on the future of ferries closes tomorrow. We are listening to everyone who is affected. The Scottish Government clearly is not, because there is no compensation for Mull, where the toy shops of Tobermory are genuinely displaying signs that say that their toy ferries are more reliable than their real-life counterparts.

There is no compensation for Cumbrae or Ardrossan, which has lost its link to Arran because the SNP Government built a boat that does not fit

its harbour. There is no compensation for the islands and port towns of the west Highlands or in Argyll and Bute, where timetables were stripped back to hide cancellations.

Sympathy does not pay the bills. When will the First Minister enrol those communities in the scheme? When will they get the cash?

The First Minister: I will take the example that Mr Cole-Hamilton puts to me about the ferry service to Arran. The Government has put in place a two-vessel service between Troon and Brodick. I accept the disruption to Ardrossan. That is why Mr Gibson has been given the solemn commitment of the Government on the acquisition of Ardrossan harbour, so that we can take it into public ownership and ensure that it gets the enhancements that it requires.

I have demonstrated that there has been a two-vessel service between the mainland and Arran on a constant basis. There are, of course, other ferry links from the mainland to Arran, at Lochranza. A variety of other opportunities are available. Where the service has, unfortunately, not been satisfactory, we have provided compensation. That has come about by examining and exploring the disruption that has taken place and providing the support that our islanders deserve.

Food and Drink Costs (Inflation)

4. Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): To ask the First Minister what assessment the Scottish Government has made of the potential impact on households in Scotland of the forecasts from the Food and Drink Federation that food and drink inflation could reach 5.7 per cent by December. (S6F-04313)

The First Minister (John Swinney): I agree with Mr MacDonald and with the comments from the Food and Drink Federation, whose forecast is concerning, particularly for low-income households in Scotland that are already grappling with cost of living pressures and are disproportionately affected rising food prices.

I will quote the chief economist of KPMG, who summarised the situation as follows:

“Since April, the rise in inflation has been driven largely by domestic policy choices, including the increase in employer national insurance contributions.”

The Scottish Government is taking steps to try to support households. Our most recent intervention has been the abolition of peak rail fares, and we have other interventions, such as the Scottish child payment. What does not help us is to have significant negative economic impacts coming from policy choices such as the United Kingdom Government's decision to increase

employer national insurance contributions, which is damaging the economy.

Gordon MacDonald: According to the Food and Drink Federation, the inflation increase is down to Labour policies such as the rise in national insurance contributions and skyrocketing energy prices, which means that families and businesses in Scotland are once again paying the price for Westminster policies. Will the First Minister outline what the Scottish Government is doing to provide support to families in Edinburgh Pentlands, and across Scotland, who are struggling with the ever-increasing cost of living?

The First Minister: The Government is taking steps, through our budget provisions, to allocate more than £3 billion to policies that tackle poverty and the cost of living. Those measures include the Scottish child payment, free prescriptions, supported bus travel for 2.3 million people and support for early learning and childcare of more than £6,000 per eligible individual.

The Government is taking steps, using our own resources, to support families facing difficulties, and we will constantly look to establish how best that can be undertaken, but we have to do that against the backdrop of decisions taken by the United Kingdom Government that create ever more challenges for families and for the Scottish Government in addressing those circumstances for families in our country.

Town and City Centres

5. Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the First Minister how the Scottish Government will support town and city centres as retail destinations. (S6F-04296)

The First Minister (John Swinney): Economic growth is at the very heart of the Government's agenda and we are working closely with businesses to drive economic growth in our towns and cities and to support both consumers and local businesses.

That support includes funding the Scotland loves local campaign, more than £3 million in funding to address retail crime and the most generous business rates relief in the United Kingdom. Our competitive non-domestic rates regime in 2025-26 includes a freeze on the basic property rate, delivering the lowest such rate in the United Kingdom for the seventh year running and maintaining the lowest property tax rate in the UK for more than 95 per cent of non-domestic properties in Scotland. Those are some of the measures that we are taking to support towns and city centres.

Murdo Fraser: All members will be aware of the decline of town and city centres as traditional retail destinations. This week, the Scottish Retail

Consortium published a five-point plan to make retail investment more attractive, including changes in planning, a focus on retail crime and, crucially, a "more competitive" business rate than in England.

Despite what the First Minister has just said, in the past three years, the Scottish Government has not passed on to businesses here the far more generous rates relief that is available south of the border. Will the Government now rethink its position and give retailers here the support that they need?

The First Minister: I welcome the Scottish Retail Consortium's contribution to the debate and we will further consider its proposals. The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government met with the Scottish Retail Consortium this week and we will give every consideration to its ideas.

The Government has taken a number of steps to support town centres. As I indicated in my earlier answer to Mr Fraser, we maintain the lowest property tax rate in the UK for more than 95 per cent of non-domestic properties. The Government has a long track record of ensuring that businesses in our town centres are supported by a competitive business tax regime and we will look to reflect that in the policy and budget proposals that the Government brings forward.

Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): It is well understood that hospitality businesses bring people to town and city centres, which benefits all, including retail, as happens in the superb Shore area in my constituency, and on Leith Walk and elsewhere.

However, I know that too many of our hospitality businesses are struggling at the moment, largely because of the increases in employer national insurance contributions that were made earlier this year, as well as other factors. Does the First Minister agree with the view, which I and UKHospitality share, that the United Kingdom Chancellor of the Exchequer must consider a VAT cut for hospitality in the UK Government's upcoming budget?

The First Minister: Such a measure would certainly help the hospitality sector and would go some way towards dealing with the negative consequences of the increase in employer national insurance contributions. It is beyond my conception as to why it is a good idea for a United Kingdom Government that is supposedly interested in growth to apply an increase in employer national insurance contributions. Such increases stifle growth, and we are seeing the effects of that in many communities around the country.

Mr Macpherson set out the arguments that the UK Government will need to consider in the

budget. We will, of course, make representations to the UK Government on that question. In addition to the steps that we are taking in Scotland to support many businesses in our town and retail centres, we will continue to consider any changes in regulation and in the planning system that we could apply that would make it easier for businesses to trade and to create the type of economic opportunities that we want to be available in our town and retail communities.

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I welcome the UK Labour Government's commitment to provide millions of pounds for Kirkcaldy town centre. That investment has the potential to kick-start the town centre regeneration of the lang toun. How will the First Minister work with the UK Government and the community to maximise the benefits?

The First Minister: I welcome the investment that the UK Government has made in Kirkcaldy town centre. I welcome any such contribution, but we must see the whole picture. Kirkcaldy town centre's difficulties will have been exacerbated by the increase in employer national insurance contributions, which has made it more expensive to employ people in our economy. I am all for giving a warm welcome to the benevolence of the UK Government, but I will also point out its shortcomings, and there are plenty of those.

Homelessness (Protection)

6. Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): To ask the First Minister what action the Scottish Government is taking to protect renters in the private sector from homelessness. (S6F-04300)

The First Minister (John Swinney): Scotland leads the United Kingdom in supporting private tenants, and that work is backed by some of the strongest homelessness legislation in the country.

In addition, we have recently announced an ambitious plan, backed by the provision of £4.9 billion, to accelerate action on tackling the housing emergency. The Housing (Scotland) Bill, which is now at stage 3, will further strengthen support by introducing new prevention duties, enhanced protections for domestic abuse victims and new tenants' rights, including the introduction of rent controls. This year, we are also providing more than £99 million to local authorities for discretionary housing payments to mitigate Westminster's cruel bedroom tax.

However, there are limits on how much the Scottish Government can do. One of the most significant levers of support is local housing allowance, and this Government has repeatedly called on the UK Government to commit to uprating housing support for tenants. I hope that

that will be delivered in the upcoming budget on 26 November.

Maggie Chapman: A renter moving into their new home today will have no clear sense of how long they can stay before they could be kicked out by their landlord. They may have as little as four weeks', and a maximum of three months', notice. Sarah and James and their two children were evicted from their home in Inverness and were unable to find a suitable home in the three-month notice period. A family of four was forced into a cramped one-bedroom flat that was so much smaller than what they needed.

Renters in England will soon be protected from eviction on the most common grounds for the first 12 months of their tenancy and will also get a longer notice period, but that right does not currently exist in Scotland. We can fix that when we consider the Housing (Scotland) Bill next week. Will the First Minister commit to supporting Green amendments that would ensure that Scotland does not fall behind and would improve protections from eviction for renters in Scotland?

The First Minister: I appreciate the significance of Maggie Chapman's points. I want to make sure that families can rely on good-quality accommodation, which is why the Government is investing so significantly in housing. We are making progress on acquisitions and voids work, through which we are bringing more and more properties back into use. That is a consequence of the increased Government investment. Significant protections are already in place in existing legislation and, as Maggie Chapman indicated, consideration will be given to the Housing (Scotland) Bill as it goes through its final stages in the relatively near future. The Government will look at all policy proposals, but I encourage Maggie Chapman to consider the significant steps that have already been taken to provide greater protection for renters in Scotland and that provide substantial protection for individuals and tenants in Scotland.

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): The truth is that the Scottish National Party has had 18 years to get a grip of Scotland's worsening housing shortage. Figures that were released this week show that the number of families in temporary accommodation has increased by 6 per cent, 10,000 children remain trapped in temporary accommodation, and rough sleeping is on the rise—[Interruption.]

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear Ms Gallacher.

Meghan Gallacher: They do not want to hear it, Presiding Officer, but the figures speak for themselves. Can the First Minister tell the Parliament when the housing emergency will end?

Is he confident that his Government can achieve the target of 15,000 affordable homes, especially when we are debating a housing bill next week that will not result in one single home being built?

The First Minister: What builds homes is the combination of private investment—and the Government has made changes to the Housing (Scotland) Bill to enable that to be sustainable—and public expenditure. The public expenditure for housing in the Government's budget in 2025-26 is £808 million, which is £251 million more than it was last year. Meghan Gallacher was one of the Conservative members who, like the Labour Party, did not vote for that provision. This is another example of members of Parliament not being prepared to vote for the provisions that will solve the problems that they are raising with me at First Minister's questions. That is not a way to solve the housing crisis—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear the First Minister.

The First Minister: The way to solve the housing crisis in Scotland is to build on the strong record of this Government, which has built—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Members. We have many members wishing to ask questions. Let us hear one another.

The First Minister: Let me explain my point: between 1999 and 2007, an average of 5,448 affordable homes were built each year under the Labour and Liberal Democrat Government. Under this Government, it is an average of 7,734 each year. The SNP Government has built more houses on average per year than our predecessors. That is because we are prepared to take the action to deliver on the housing emergency when everyone in the Labour and Conservative parties just postures.

The Presiding Officer: We move to general and constituency supplementaries.

Scotland's Gaming Industry

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): Scotland's gaming industry continues to go from strength to strength. This week, Scotland hosted the prestigious DICE Europe summit for the first time, which saw industry global leaders come to Edinburgh for key talks. What assessment has the Scottish Government made of the sector's contribution to Scotland's economy, and what steps is the First Minister taking to ensure that skills and support are in place to ensure that Scotland continues to be a hub for the games industry?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I very much welcome Clare Adamson's points. It was my

pleasure to host, along with the minister responsible for innovation, Richard Lochhead, representatives of the games industry at Bute house on Monday evening as part of the prestigious DICE Europe summit, which had come to Scotland for the first time. It is an industry that matters, and we brought its senior leaders to Bute house to consider how we can continue to build on the growth that has already been delivered. We now have an industry in Scotland that has increased in turnover by nearly 800 per cent since 2010—that is a huge vote of confidence in the industry.

The Government is investing in our skills system to ensure that our universities are able to produce the graduates who will support the industry, and we provide targeted enterprise support for our start-up ecosystem. We have a range of other programmes to support our creative industries, which again, this week, delivered formidable achievements in taking steps to engage young people and members of the public. I very much welcome the participation of the DICE summit in Scotland and I look forward to supporting the industry as part of the Government's focus on growth.

Warmworks

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): Since last November, I have been assisting a couple and their baby daughter to obtain support from Warmworks to replace their broken heating system with a zero-carbon alternative. That process began more than a year ago, and in that time they have had no permanent heating or hot water in their home, where both the young child and their mother have chronic health conditions.

Warmworks has offered conflicting advice; it has lost reports; and, despite a helpful intervention from the Cabinet Secretary for Housing, Màiri McAllan, when she instructed Warmworks to re-engage with my office, it has failed to respond to both my constituents and me in the timescales directed by the cabinet secretary.

Will the First Minister and his cabinet secretary please look into my constituents' situation as a matter of urgency, before they spend another winter without heating or hot water?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I ask Mr Whittle to furnish me with the details of the case; it will obviously be familiar to the Government if the cabinet secretary has already intervened.

I have to say that I am not very happy with what Mr Whittle has recounted, because if a cabinet secretary directs an organisation to engage with a member of Parliament, I would expect that engagement to be substantial, regardless of the politics in the chamber. I have dealt with

Warmworks on a constituency basis on a number of occasions, and have pursued cases where things had not worked out perfectly, so if Mr Whittle would give me the details of that case, I will pursue it on his behalf.

Fire Service Provision (Edinburgh)

Foyso Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): What urgent action is the Scottish Government taking to ensure adequate fire service provision in Edinburgh, in the light of the reported proposal to close Marionville fire station, despite the area's expanding population and the increased activity at Leith docks?

The First Minister (John Swinney): There is a consultation process under way, led by the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, which is looking fundamentally at the basis for delivering a safe and sustainable fire service that is appropriate for our needs at this particular time.

I know that there is widespread concern about Marionville fire station; I have seen representations about that, and I encourage all interested parties to engage with the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service. I give Mr Choudhury an assurance that the SFRS will undertake the consultation on the basis of assessing the needs to enable sustainable and safe delivery of a service, and that must include a service for his constituents in the city of Edinburgh.

Whisky Industry (Tariffs)

Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP): I welcome the First Minister's unwavering commitment to protecting and enhancing our Scotch whisky industry—a vital, thriving sector that creates thousands of jobs across Scotland.

Can the First Minister provide further details on his recent meeting with President Trump in Washington ahead of the United Kingdom and US trade talks? At that meeting, he made the case to reduce the tariffs on the Scotch whisky industry—something which the US industry supports.

The First Minister (John Swinney): As colleagues will be aware, I travelled to Washington DC last week to support the efforts of the Scotch Whisky Association and its counterparts in the United States in the Distilled Spirits Council of the United States and the Kentucky Distillers Association, which have a shared and symbiotic relationship in relation to the sustainability of the industry.

I was fortunate to have the opportunity to spend about 50 minutes with President Trump explaining that argument, and I engaged substantially with the President on the issue.

I make it clear to Parliament that I was making representations on behalf of the industry—I was not negotiating a trade deal; that is the proper responsibility of the United Kingdom Government. However, I also had the opportunity last night, at the state event that was hosted by His Majesty the King at Windsor castle, to discuss the issue further with President Trump. I will continue to engage in order to ensure that I deliver the type of zero-for-zero arrangement that the United States whiskey industry and the Scotch whisky industry are seeking, because I think that that makes economic sense on both sides of the Atlantic.

Energy Infrastructure (Community Groups)

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): In the coming days, Scottish and Southern Electricity Networks will submit its planning applications to have megapylons span from the Highlands right through the north-east to the central belt. Community groups in rural areas feel ignored. Gillian Martin is happy to jet off to Japan next week to sell off Scotland's countryside to foreign wind developers, but she still refuses to meet those community groups. Will the First Minister do something that his energy minister is too feart to do and meet those groups who are seeing their countryside trashed by energy infrastructure?

The First Minister (John Swinney): As a matter of fact, the Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Energy is in Japan this week. She is at the Osaka expo, at which she is promoting the tremendous strengths of Scotland in renewable energy. That is exactly the type of work that ministers should be doing to promote the interests of Scotland to an international audience. I welcome all that the energy secretary is doing.

Mr Lumsden invites me to consider issues that will become the subject of live planning consideration by ministers. He knows the rules as well as I do: I cannot engage on issues of this nature that will be determined by ministers. The proper process will be followed.

Care Workers (Enable Scotland)

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests.

Care workers, 80 per cent of whom are women and many of whom are among our lowest-paid workers, make independent living possible. Indeed, I would not be in this chamber without them. However, Enable Scotland staff in Glasgow have been forced to strike because of recurring empty promises to deliver sectoral bargaining and fair pay. That has left carers across the sector rightly angry and third sector organisations really struggling. I stand in solidarity with those staff and

their trade union, Unison, which has said that—I will quote care workers in Glasgow—despite promises,

“the Scottish government have delivered year-on-year disappointments.”

When will the First Minister and his Government stop disappointing? Will he acknowledge that care has been undervalued by the Government, and will he get round the table with care workers as soon as possible on sectoral bargaining and pay parity, starting with pay of at least £15 per hour?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I totally acknowledge the points that Pam Duncan-Glancy makes about the importance of care workers and supporting independent living. I express my admiration for those workers in general, and especially for the fine individuals who support Ms Duncan-Glancy, who are always a joy to see in the Parliament.

This is a pay dispute between Unison and Enable, so I have to leave it to the trade union and employers to resolve it. For its part, the Government is investing around £900 million in social care pay support. I value the work that care workers undertake; the state relies entirely on those care workers to provide that support. We continue to look at what more we can do in that respect. It will be a material part of the budget process and, as I said in one of my earlier answers, the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government will engage with all parties on those priorities in the run-up to the setting of the Government's budget for the next financial year.

Local Housing Allowance (Rates)

Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): The United Kingdom Government's harmful decision to continue the Tory freeze on local housing allowance rates will impact thousands of low-income renters in Scotland, widening the gap between housing support for private renters and private sector rents.

Will the First Minister join me in calling on the Labour UK Government to permanently repeg LHA rates to at least the 30th percentile of local rents? The Resolution Foundation states that that vital move would

“lift 75,000 children out of poverty”

by the end of the current UK parliamentary session.

The Presiding Officer: I remind all members that questions should be put referencing the First Minister's responsibilities in a clear manner.

The First Minister (John Swinney): The Scottish Government recognises the issue. In one of my earlier answers, I made reference to the

local housing allowance; that uplift would assist us to tackle the issues of homelessness that we are wrestling with and to support families who are living with poverty.

In this financial year, the Government is making £7.9 million available to mitigate shortfalls in local housing allowance rates and help to protect tenancies. We are making a further £2 million available to support households in temporary accommodation to find settled homes.

There would be much greater assistance if a link were to be established with the local housing allowance. I encourage the UK Labour Government to do exactly that.

Whisky Industry

Jackson Carlaw (Eastwood) (Con): Further to Evelyn Tweed's question about the whisky industry, I congratulate the First Minister on his attendance at the state banquet for President Trump and the first lady of the United States at Windsor castle yesterday.

The whole chamber will rejoice at the warm personal emerging relationship that is developing between the First Minister and the President. It fair gladdens all of our hearts. In fact, I feel the hearts of the Scottish Greens melting, even as I speak. *[Laughter.]*

What was not immediately clear from the answer that the First Minister gave to Evelyn Tweed, and what I think members wish to know, is what impression he got from President Trump of the representations that he made on behalf of the Scottish whisky industry. Does the First Minister hope or have any expectation that those representations might lead to good news for our industry in the near future?

The First Minister (John Swinney): One thing that I will always be able to say about Jackson Carlaw is that he knows how to bring hilarity into the parliamentary chamber. *[Interruption.]* Oh, and Jackie Baillie thinks that I can manage it, too. I am glad that I am conveying such bonhomie. It is not always how Jackie Baillie describes my contribution to Parliament but, if bonhomie is the order of the day, I shall settle for that.

On Mr Carlaw's question, the fact that President Trump was prepared to engage in discussions about that issue in the Oval office should be welcomed, because it indicates a willingness to consider the propositions that I am putting forward. Fundamentally, all that I can ask for is to get a fair hearing about issues that are affecting the industry in Scotland. I was able to marshal, for President Trump, some of the difficulties that are being created for the industry in Scotland as a consequence of tariffs. Some such difficulties are also prevalent in the United States, because the

tariffs are leading to a loss of employment in Kentucky, due to the reduction in production activity in the Scotch whisky industry. I hope that, with regard to what I have characterised as a win-win situation, President Trump will be persuaded by my arguments, but time will tell on that matter.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes First Minister's question time.

Point of Order

12:47

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. You know what I am going to mention, because I emailed you this morning seeking to raise the matter after First Minister's question time.

First Minister, as I left the chamber yesterday, I was physically assaulted and verbally abused by your Minister for Parliamentary Business, Jamie Hepburn.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Please speak through the chair, Mr Ross.

Douglas Ross: This is the point that I wish to make to the First Minister: I wonder whether he will make a statement and take the opportunity to say that he has a zero-tolerance approach to threatening and intimidating behaviour by his ministers. I raised the matter yesterday afternoon with parliamentary officials. I notice that the Minister for Parliamentary Business is not in the chamber this afternoon. Therefore, will he be making a statement on the incident later today?

The Presiding Officer: Comments addressed to the First Minister in the chamber are not a point of order. However, this is a very serious allegation, and it is important that it is dealt with through the appropriate processes. I expect all members to take their responsibilities under the code of conduct seriously. If anyone considers that the conduct of a member has not met the terms of the code, a complaint can be made.

Complaints in relation to most matters covered by the code, including a complaint of this nature, would be initially investigated by the Commissioner for Ethical Standards in Public Life in Scotland. Recommendations in relation to any complaints may come to the chamber in due course, so I must avoid any comment that might compromise that. However, complaints about the conduct of a member arising in their ministerial duties are dealt with under the Scottish ministerial code and are a matter for the First Minister. Thank you.

We will allow a few moments for those in the chamber and in the gallery to clear before the next item of business.

Wildfires

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): Business is resuming, so I ask members who are leaving the chamber and those who are leaving the public gallery to do so as quickly and quietly as possible.

The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-18710, in the name of Emma Roddick, on the increasing frequency and intensity of wildfires. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament notes with grave concern the reported increasing frequency and intensity of wildfires in Scotland, including in the Highlands and Islands, and the devastating impact these events have on the environment, economy and communities; recognises what it sees as the unique vulnerability of the Highlands and Islands due to its expansive rural landscape, peatlands and the changing climate; highlights what it sees as the significant risks posed to biodiversity, air quality and critical infrastructure; recognises what it sees as the immense pressure that is placed on emergency services, local resources and the resilience efforts that are required from everyone, from government to third sector volunteers; notes the reported role of climate change, land management practices and human activity in contributing to these events, and further notes the calls on the Scottish Government to review its wildfire prevention and response strategies, and for cross-party collaboration to develop a robust, long-term plan to mitigate the threat of wildfires, discourage irresponsible behaviours and build resilience in communities.

12:50

Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): First, I recognise that, as I speak, there is a crowd of people outside the Parliament from the climate mass lobby. I know that a number of my constituents have made the journey from the Highlands and Islands in order to have their voices heard. While I am in the chamber, leading what I know is a very important debate, I recognise what they are doing as well, and I apologise that I cannot be with them today.

The increasing intensity and frequency of wildfires is expected given climate change and the related extreme weather events that we are seeing. I am clear that effort is needed to tackle climate change if we want this world to remain habitable for our species and to mitigate the impacts of wildfires, flooding and other events on our infrastructure, communities and natural environment.

The less we do to limit our impact on climate change, the more it is going to cost us in lives and livelihoods, and financially. These are expensive events to tackle and recover from. The overall efforts to decarbonise transport, housing and energy are not separate from what I am about to

speak to, and neither is restoring biodiversity. However, in the rest of my speech, I will focus on the reality that, regardless of what I hope will become an escalation in efforts worldwide to address our impact on the climate, we need to get better at preventing and reacting to wildfires.

I have had many constituents write to me about wildfires. Some have personally been heavily impacted by them and others are simply devastated by what they have witnessed, particularly at Dava moor this summer. The fires destroyed woodland and killed thousands of animals, and reportedly people could smell them from as far away from the site as Orkney.

A common theme in what folk have been calling for is action against the irresponsible tourism and camping that are so often linked to these events. Even when the exact cause is not known, as at Dava, the remains of glass bottles, burned tinfoil and campsites that are spotted among the devastation infuriate locals, especially victims of the blaze.

The Cairngorms National Park Authority is leading the way, with Scotland's first fire management byelaw—to restrict open fires and barbecues—currently waiting for sign-off from ministers. I am glad that such steps are being taken to protect our national park, but I and many others in the Highlands would like that action to be replicated across the region. The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity has heard from me on numerous occasions about the potential for a Scotland-wide ban on disposable barbecues, particularly over the summer months, and I hope that, when he sums up, he will lay out any limitations on the Government doing that and say what his suggested way forward is. It is not enough to say that the issue is complex and leave it alone. We need to take action here. If we are unsure about devolved competence, we must test it and not just abdicate responsibility.

The temporary fun of a disposable barbecue is not worth the danger to life, whether human or animal—wild or livestock—the risk to the environment, or the potential damage to rural businesses and homes. As the chief executive officer of the CNPA, Grant Moir, told me, the recreational fires that were agreed as being appropriate 25 years ago are no longer so. The risk of wildfires has increased, their intensity when they catch is greater and the incidence of uncontrolled fires, thanks to folk taking risks, is simply too high.

The CNPA is doing a lot that could be replicated elsewhere and it is leading the way. We do not need to reinvent any wheels. Under its climate adaptation fund, it has so far provided grants of more than £600,000, including for fire management equipment and training for estates

and contractors. With Scottish Land & Estates, it is working to replace equipment that was damaged in the Dava fires. That building of resilience and use of existing expertise and roles that are based on the ground where the wildfires take place will undoubtedly support faster and more effective reactions when fires are spotted.

Another issue is raised with me frequently. Who should have easy access to a helicopter? Among the various suggestions that have been made, one is that NatureScot is not quick enough to react because landowner insurance can cause issues. Given the risks in allowing fires to spread, looking at how the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service can more quickly and reliably get access to helicopter support in tackling blazes seems overdue. Scottish Land & Estates has suggested that the fire service should have its own helicopter capabilities. A constituent of mine suggested that responsibility should sit with NatureScot and another told me that it really does not matter, and that whoever can react should be given the resources to do so.

Management of fuel load comes up frequently, too, and I hope that the minister will respond to demands from gamekeepers to ensure that muirburn licences are attainable to help with wildfire prevention. Mutual aid provided by land managers in a crisis is invaluable. Those people know about the land, access to it and the risk factors involved. As the Government responds to cross-party calls for more action on wildfires, it will need to include those voices in plans and policies.

I am not one to call for action plans, strategies or other Government stratagems, but the lack of a Scottish wildfire plan seems to be a screaming gap, given the massive co-ordination between authorities that is needed to manage not only risk but active incidents. The kit that is available to fire services to tackle wildfires must be considered in the context of their work with other people on the ground, and all parties should be part of the necessary discussions on what further SFRS equipment could be helpful and complementary to local efforts.

I have already shared with Government the suggestion of one constituent that we need more data and strong evidence about land use and the vegetation that was on the ground at the time that a wildfire caught and spread. Knowing more about that reality—rather than different sectors pointing fingers at one another—would be invaluable.

Even my generous seven minutes is not long enough to cover all the points that have been raised by stakeholders reacting to today's debate, but I look forward to hearing everyone else's contributions.

The debate has attracted one of the largest volumes of correspondence that I have had about

a members' business debate. My excellent motion-drafting skills might have played a part in that, but I suspect that the bigger reason is the genuine and deep-rooted willingness of people on the ground—gamekeepers, non-governmental organisations, the public and lobby groups—to play their part in wildfire prevention and tackling incidents.

The Scottish Government has access to the wealth of knowledge, experience and volunteer willingness that exists out there, which it can grab hold of to tackle the increasing intensity and frequency of wildfires. I hope that it sincerely and enthusiastically makes use of that, and that the cross-party consensus that I hope we are about to hear results in real, concentrated action.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I advise members that there is an awful lot of interest in the debate. I am keen to ensure that everybody who has requested to speak has an opportunity to do so for the four minutes that they are entitled to. Members will need to stick to four minutes, even with the motion without notice to extend the debate that I confidently predict will be necessary.

12:58

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): It is refreshing to have a debate on a burning issue that truly matters to communities across Scotland rather than the recent focus on foreign policy and constitutional wrangling.

Puns aside, this is a very serious issue. The increasing frequency and intensity of wildfires in Scotland, including in my constituency of Galloway and West Dumfries, is deeply alarming. Wildfires are no longer rare events; they are a growing threat to people, property and our natural environment. I thank Emma Roddick for bringing this important debate to the chamber. The issue demands urgent action from the SNP Government—it should not be another issue that is kicked into the long grass.

Traditionally, the peak fire season in Dumfries and Galloway runs from early March for around 12 weeks, yet this year we saw 10 fire alerts between 13 January and 15 September. That is an unusually high figure compared with previous years, going back to 2012. The response to a freedom of information request revealed that Scotland has suffered 1,574 wildfires during the past decade. Alarming, the figures show that there were more wildfires during this year than in any other full year except 2017 and 2018. The figures, which are drawn from Scottish Fire and Rescue Service data, coincide with periods of historically high temperatures, as confirmed by weather forecasters' records.

During the same period, Scotland has increased its tree cover, reduced grazing by sheep and deer and seen fewer hectares of upland under active management through prescribed burning. Those changes, which some believe are well intentioned, have undeniably contributed to the problem. The threat is not only to human life but to wildlife in our countryside, where the loss of tree cover has been dramatic.

The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie): Will the member take an intervention?

Finlay Carson: I am sorry, but I do not have time.

In early April, a major wildfire in Galloway forced the evacuation of people and properties. Emergency services, supported by helicopters, battled a blaze that stretched several miles wide at its peak. Amid the crisis, the response from volunteers and local organisations was nothing short of extraordinary. Galloway Mountain Rescue Team worked tirelessly around the clock, evacuating campers from danger zones, often in the dead of night. Using advanced thermal imaging tools such as drones, it provided critical intelligence to the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service and even co-ordinated rescue 199 from Prestwick in airlifting people to safety. The team's efforts undoubtedly saved lives and prevented tragedy.

We must also commend the Glentool Hive community volunteers, who provided food, shelter and welfare support to exhausted responders during the height of the emergency. Their support and resilience were a lifeline for those on the front lines. Local farmers and land-based businesses also stepped up to supply water bowzers, all-terrain vehicles and manpower to help to contain the fire. That collaboration between emergency services, rural businesses and volunteers demonstrates the very best of community spirit in the face of adversity.

Although public behaviour is a factor, the Scottish National Party Government cannot ignore its responsibility for ensuring that our communities are better prepared. That means listening to those with first-hand experience—the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service—rather than ignoring their warnings. Earlier this year, I called on the First Minister to listen and take action. Instead, he ignored my calls and blamed those who did not support his budget. That response was far from acceptable. Regrettably, the First Minister seems determined to press ahead with savage cuts that will close fire stations in many rural areas, cost jobs, inevitably increase response times and put lives at risk. The Fire Brigades Union has been clear that there must be no further cuts.

If the SNP Government is serious about protecting the public from wildfires and other emergencies, it must act now. That means proper funding of our fire service, listening to the expert advice and supporting voluntary and rural sectors.

The Minister for Victims and Community Safety (Siobhian Brown): Will the member give way?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: No.

Finlay Carson: I once again put on record my heartfelt thanks to Galloway Mountain Rescue Team, the Glentool Hive volunteers and the many local farmers and businesses who gave of their time to protect lives and livestock. I—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Carson. I call Emma Harper, who has up to four minutes.

13:02

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): I thank Emma Roddick for securing the debate. Her region was hit hard with the biggest wildfire this summer around Dava, which caused massive devastation in an area of great beauty and natural resource. Sadly, parts of my South Scotland region were also hit hard. April saw one of the biggest wildfires in living memory in Galloway, when 17,000 acres of moor and forest were destroyed around Glentool in a fire lasting several days, the after-effects of which are still being seen in the community and will be seen for many years to come. That is nearly the entire surface area of Loch Lomond ablaze and alight, and now almost bereft of life.

Thankfully, as with other wildfires in Scotland, there were no fatalities or serious injuries, at least among human beings, but I am also concerned about the wildlife. It may only be a matter of time before someone is seriously injured or killed in a wildfire. At Glentool, hikers were evacuated from hills by emergency services and campers were told to relocate to a place of safety. I fear that, at some point in the future, we will be reading reports of the death of someone who could not be reached in time and suffered a terrible fate. We must do all that we can to prevent that from becoming a reality.

We saw just how hard our emergency and response services worked. I again place on record my thanks to the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, the police and Galloway Mountain Rescue Team for their supreme dedication, work and bravery in helping to tackle the Glentool fire. I also thank local people at the Glentool Hive, who Finlay Carson mentioned. They worked incredibly hard, in a stressful, difficult and threatening situation, to support emergency responders. They

threw open the doors of the Hive in the middle of the night and ensured that those tackling the fire could refuel and get some rest and necessary internet access.

Some years ago, there were issues with sky lanterns being launched and landing miles away, risking wildfire and damage to property and livestock. Thankfully, the use of those things seems to have died down but, in many ways, it is more disheartening that the wildfires that are now taking place are almost certainly caused in situ, and that those who are responsible, even if by accident, can see for themselves the landscape and environment that their actions might destroy.

I am proud that we have some of the best open access legislation in the world. In contrast to the hugely restrictive regime across the border, for example, we have a framework that allows people to enjoy our land freely and without unnecessary restrictions. However, we also have to face the fact that a small minority of people exercising those rights are doing so irresponsibly and putting locals, their livelihoods and their environment at huge risk.

We cannot say for certain what caused the Galloway wildfires. Finding a needle in a haystack is impossibly tricky when that haystack is 17,000 acres, but our Fire and Rescue Service is clear that most wildfires are started by human activity. That means that we must educate anyone who is accessing our world-class countryside about the devastation that irresponsible use of those access rights can have on our communities.

Climate change is here, and we have to adjust our way of living and working to that reality. As Ms Roddick mentioned, there is a climate change mass rally at Dynamic Earth right now, which I hoped to be at.

One action to take must be to give the prevention of wildfires a higher priority across public policy. I hope that Emma Roddick's debate and the contributions from members around the chamber will play a part in informing the Government's thinking on how to, as far as possible, prevent these disasters from happening again.

13:06

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): For years, the Fire Brigades Union has been raising the alarm. The Scottish Government has been warned that there must be proper plans in place to deal with wildfires and the necessary resources to support them. The increase in wildfires is due to climate change and changes in heather moor management, and we need urgent climate action if we are to properly protect life and property from wildfires.

The Scottish Fire and Rescue Service needs significant investment. That means more firefighters better equipped and trained, along with better planning, research and co-ordination. The head of the service, instead of fighting for proper investment for the service, has presided over, and in some cases, recommended, unprecedented cuts to front-line resources. Understaffing has been so bad throughout the last period of wildfires that nearly all fire and rescue services in the most severely affected areas had to call up off-duty firefighters and ask them to work extra shifts. Fire engines sat in stations because there were not enough people to crew them in such circumstances. Fire Brigades Union members have worked to exhaustion.

I have lodged a series of parliamentary questions seeking information on the current state of the service in the Highlands and Islands. I was alarmed to learn that, of the 125 on-call fire stations, there are only 10 with a full team—that is less than 10 per cent. In more rural areas of my constituency, that is exacerbated by many volunteers not working locally during the day, reducing the cover even further.

I had confirmed that the SFRS has lost more than 1,200 firefighters since the SNP came to power in 2007. It is currently operating with a 29 per cent vacancy rate, so it is no wonder that the service is under so much pressure. Firefighters are asked to place themselves at risk without the necessary kit, and they are expected to work on hillsides with the same gear that they use to enter burning buildings. The physical stress puts this workforce at extreme risk.

Since the creation of the SFRS on 1 April 2013, the service has suffered tens of millions of pounds' worth of real-term cuts. The plain facts are that, since 2012-13, the year before it was created, to 2023-24, there has been a reduction of more than 1,250 firefighters in Scotland—the total workforce has reduced by more than a sixth in that time. Of the 1,250 jobs lost, 729 were whole-time firefighters and a further 368 were retained operational firefighters. Those are direct cuts to front-line services.

The £332.1 million resource budget for the SFRS in 2025-26 equates to a £56 million real-terms cut in the 12-year period since the service was formed. Sustained underinvestment is creating problems, with an £800 million capital backlog. We must be grateful to the gamekeepers and others who have come to the aid of the service, but we should not have to depend on the general public to prop it up.

13:10

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (Ind): On 28 June, several wildfires raged, covering an area that included Dava, Lochindorb and Carrbridge, which are all in my constituency. That was the largest wildfire that has been recorded in Scotland's history and it covered an area of around 40 square miles, which is half the size of the city of Edinburgh. A wildfire that occurred in Caithness in the flow country a couple of years ago was estimated to have produced 700,000 tonnes of carbon dioxide. That was half the area of the fire on 28 June, so it can safely be assumed that its carbon emissions were well over 1 million tonnes. To put that into perspective, the reduction in carbon that was achieved in Scotland for 2022-23 was 0.9 million tonnes in total. The fire created more of a problem for the environment than all our efforts to reduce carbon for a whole year in Scotland.

I do not know why the Scottish Government has not said that, nor do I know why residents in Dava, some of whom I have spoken to, had no information or advice whatsoever about whether they should evacuate their homes as fires approached them from both sides. The lady who I spoke to does not want her name to be identified or to speak out. She had an elderly neighbour of 82 years old; they received no help—their families had to help them—and no advice, even though they asked for it. People were nice, but they could not say anything. No one from the headquarters down the road in Grantown-on-Spey went to see them. The day after the fire began, I asked ministers whether they would hold a Scottish Government resilience room meeting. They should have, but they did not—why not?

Jim Fairlie: Will the member take an intervention?

Fergus Ewing: I am sorry, but I have only four minutes. I am happy to discuss it at a meeting. As the minister knows, I normally take interventions.

There are a huge number of things that we have to do, but a plethora of public bodies are involved, including the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, CNPA, NatureScot and Forestry and Land Scotland—which, apparently, does not allow its employees to tackle fires on their own property, which is absurd. As so many public bodies are involved, I think that an independent review is required; otherwise, I am afraid to say, bodies will just mark their own homework. Although lots of them do good things, as some members have said, collectively, they have no plan.

I raised the issue during general question time today, but in some areas, such as Glenmore from Aviemore to Cairngorm, or Drymen to Rowardennan from Ben Lomond, there is only one

road in and one road out. I have lived in both areas, so I know that they get 3,000 visitors a day. If there is a fire, people will go back to where they came from and will die in their cars from smoke inhalation. People do not die because of fires; they die because of panic and smoke inhalation.

There is no plan at all. I have not got time to go through them all, but there are lots of things that we require, such as aerial cover, more training, and plans that should be implemented by individual estates. Essentially, there is no public rural wildfire service in Scotland—it is run by landowners. Goodness me, the fire service contributes, but it works limited hours: I believe that its employees do not work in the evening, or on moorland. It is up to the keepers, who are under attack from legislation that is so pernicious that it is trying to get rid of field sports altogether. Without keepers and controlled muirburn, we ain't seen nothing yet for wildfires in Scotland. I hope that the Scottish Government will get a close grip on the issue, which is the most immediate threat to rural Scotland.

13:14

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I remind members of my entry in the register of members' interests, which states that I am involved in a family farming partnership in Moray.

I thank Emma Roddick for bringing this debate to the chamber. If it has done nothing else, it has held the minister's feet to the fire with regard to a response to a request that I made on 8 August for him to meet my constituents, Mr Ewing's constituents and other constituents in the region to discuss the issue. I found out today that he was unable to attend because he had accepted a subsequent request that was made by another MSP. That is not good enough, and I will make a complaint through the correct channels.

I have some experience of wildfires, having fought plenty of them in my time. They happen in remote areas, and it is really difficult to fight them. In many cases, specialist vehicles are required to get to them. That is what the fire brigade needs, and keepers and estates often supply such vehicles. I also reiterate the point that Mr Ewing has made, which is that wildfires are often best fought at night, when the wind is low and there is a heavy dew. However, that is the time when some parts of the fire service are unable to attend, which means that it is certainly the time when keepers go out and fight those fires. I remember one in Tongue that we fought for five days, successfully putting it out at 4 o'clock in the morning, having fought it every day and night during that period, taking only two hours off to rest.

Neighbours can provide specialist knowledge in such situations. I want to make the example personal by drawing attention to one contractor, Stephen Shand, who did not work on the estate but dropped everything to move his equipment up to where the fire was and start fighting it. He had no indication that he was going to get paid for it; he did not worry about that. He was trying to fight the fire because it was on a neighbour's land. We rely on such effort, and it is really important. The Parliament should acknowledge the effort that people make.

Fuel load is a critical issue. It is difficult to manage the fuel load in areas with wind farms—which we are getting more and more of across Scotland—and there is a particular difficulty in managing fuel load in relation to the peatland grant schemes. This Parliament, which believes that it knows better than the people on the ground, has dictated how muirburn and the management of moorland should be carried out. I am afraid that, after nearly 30 years of experience of doing that, I find some of the decisions that the Parliament has made to be completely bizarre.

I am short of time, but we need to consider what we do with regard to woodland grant schemes. When I was driving across the Dava moor the other day, by Lochindorb, I noticed all the trees that had been burned. They were all part of a woodland grant scheme and will all have to be replaced. Who will bear the cost of that? Why should it be the landowner? They did not start the fire, and there was nothing that they could do. No one will be able to attribute the cost or the blame to any individual, so it needs to be dealt with through insurance. We need to make sure that, when the Government draws up woodland grant schemes and peatland restoration schemes, insurance forms part of the proposal.

I also point out that retained crews across the Highlands lack the necessary equipment. Some of the retained crews do not even have showers at their stations, so they can be fighting fires all day and not even be able to get a shower before they go home.

Finally, I want to say that we need more assets. The Government has to draw together assets such as Argocats and the associated systems. It needs to have the ability to call on helicopters, and I strongly believe that, given the prevalence of wildfires across the UK, an aircraft that is capable of bombing fires with water should be available to both Governments. I urge the Scottish Government to liaise on that issue.

13:18

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): For years, I have travelled across the

Dava moor, making my way to the Cairngorms, Kingussie and onwards to the south and west, but nothing prepared me for the devastation that I encountered when I came over the brow of the hill on the moor this summer. Everywhere I looked, the land was black and charred. As I drove, it went on and on, with trees burned and whole hillsides ravaged by wildfire.

Earlier this summer, from the top of Cùl Mòr, I watched the fire on the side of Stac Pollaidh unfold in great yellow smoke clouds. In the aftermath of the Cannich wildfires, I met people who were on the ground at the time to understand the extent and impact of the event. I followed that up with visits to Inverness fire station to discuss the challenges that our fire and rescue teams face and what resources they need. I am also working with constituents who were traumatised by the lack of communication when the fires came close to their homes this summer.

Wildfires are no longer rare, and I am grateful that Emma Roddick has brought this issue to the chamber. Their frequency and intensity are increasing, driven by climate change, human activity and land management, and the Highlands are especially vulnerable, due to extensive peatlands, open moorland and remoteness.

Communities, living landscapes and emergency services are bearing the brunt. The environmental costs are staggering. Peatlands that should be locking in carbon instead go up in smoke, releasing vast amounts of greenhouse gases. One fire in the flow country released 700,000 tonnes of CO₂ in six days, doubling Scotland's emissions for that period. Fire strips hillsides bare, destroys habitats and undermines our climate targets.

Healthy ecosystems are our greatest defence. Rewetted peatlands and restored native woodlands are far more fire resistant than degraded moorland that is dominated by heather, and healthy soils hold more water, too, slowing the spread of flames. Where natural processes are restored, resilience increases; in North America, wetlands created by beavers have acted as natural firebreaks.

We must be honest about land management—

Jim Fairlie: Will the member give way?

Ariane Burgess: I do not have time.

Muirburn is often claimed as a prevention tool, but evidence shows that it is frequently the cause of wildfires getting out of control. We should not conflate muirburn with other fire management techniques, such as creating firebreaks or tactical burning during an emergency, which are very different in practice and risk. If we are serious about prevention, we must confront the reality that

large-scale burning of moorland is adding to, not reducing, the danger.

The issue connects directly to climate change. As our summers become hotter and drier, the risks multiply, and that makes it urgent for us to properly investigate and publicly report the causes of every wildfire. We need to learn, adapt and prevent repeat incidents.

Prevention is also about behaviour. Disposable barbecues are a known risk. Indeed, a constituent of mine told me of flames coming from a bin in a forestry car park; inside were three still-smouldering disposable barbecues. It was a fire waiting to happen, and it is time that we considered banning disposable barbecues altogether.

Meanwhile, rural fire crews—often on-call volunteers—are stretched to their limits. Communities step up, but they cannot be the last line of defence; we need a national strategy that joins up land use, climate action, biodiversity restoration and emergency response.

Let us not forget the public. Expanding the reach of the Scottish outdoor access code, increasing the number of countryside rangers and ensuring that people understand their responsibilities outdoors are all essential. This is not only about how we respond to fires once they are raging but about how we build landscapes and communities that are resilient in the first place—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you.

Ariane Burgess: It is time that the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you. I call Ben Macpherson, to be followed by Tim Eagle. You have up to four minutes, Mr Macpherson.

13:22

Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): Tackling climate change internationally is something that I am passionate about, like many others, but I have been passionate about it since way before that became a common view.

This is a global challenge. Although we need to think global and act local, we have to accept the reality: in terms of the numbers, we in Scotland have very little ability to tackle climate change at an international level. We are a small contributor to emissions, and given past emissions, and what other countries are emitting at present, our ability as a small country to affect climate change internationally is small, too. Yes, we should play our part; yes, we should do our bit; and yes, new technologies that we are leading on can make an impact beyond our shores, but our ability to effect

the cessation of or reduce global climate change is limited. We have to accept that fact, unfortunately.

No matter what we do, it is likely that, as we have seen in recent years, climate change will happen to us, because of the international situation. Therefore, although we should raise our voices to urge for more action internationally, we also need to think much more about adaptation and mitigation. We saw a shift in resources and focus towards that in the previous budget, which I welcomed; and we also saw investment in net zero, which has other benefits. As well as reducing emissions, that creates warmer homes, more breathable air and so on, as well as facilitating greater use and development of renewable energy. All those things are worth doing, but we need to think more in the long term about adaptation and mitigation, in relation to flooding as well as wildfires. That is why the debate is important.

The devastating impact of wildfires has been seen this summer. We are all afraid—and should be acting on the proposition—that wildfires are likely to happen more often as we see warmer and warmer weather. The motion understandably focuses on the Highlands, but wildfires have also affected us here in the capital city at Arthur's Seat, which is very close to where we are now. They are happening more and more.

We need action on prevention, education and minimising the risk of such fires, but we also need to have adequate resource to respond. That is why the capacity of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service matters so much. The service delivery review that is taking place is important, as we need to think strategically and effectively about how resources are allocated. However, as a local MSP, I am concerned about the proposal to close Marionville fire station. It is one of the closest fire stations to Arthur's Seat and it is in a growing city where the risk is growing.

As a society and a democracy, we, and the Government, need to think about long-term capacity building, not capacity reduction, and certainly not here in our growing capital city.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am conscious of the number of members who still want to participate in the debate, so I am minded to accept a motion without notice, under rule 8.14.3 of standing orders, to extend the debate by up to 30 minutes. I invite Emma Roddick to move such a motion.

Motion moved,

That, under rule 8.14.3, the debate be extended by up to 30 minutes.—[Emma Roddick]

Motion agreed to.

13:26

Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I congratulate Emma Roddick for bringing this much-needed debate to the Parliament. We have spoken about this topic separately.

I echo the points that have come from around the chamber. There is clearly anger and frustration about some of the fires that are happening across Scotland. I think, if I am right, that there is a consensus on and cross-party support for the need for action. I would be happy to join any meeting or round table that we could have with the minister to discuss what that action could be. I mean that in a positive way—I can see that the minister does not think so, but I genuinely do mean that in a positive way.

In recent years, Scotland has witnessed a deeply concerning trend. The number and intensity of wildfires across our country is growing. Such fires are not isolated incidents; they are becoming more frequent, more destructive and more dangerous for our people, our land and our wildlife.

I have put some of that into numbers. Although wildfire figures vary year to year, the upward trend is stark. Between 2024 and the first half of 2025, the number of recorded wildfires more than tripled, from 55 in all of 2024 to 187 in just the first six months of this year. That is already higher than any annual figure since 2017. We can safely assume that the total figure for 2025 will rise further, because the data does not yet include the peak summer months of July and August. To put that into perspective, the figure of 187 wildfires that have already been recorded in 2025 is close to double the total for 2015, when 111 wildfires were recorded. The direction of travel is undeniable: the number of wildfires in Scotland is rising.

The Highlands remain the most severely affected region by a large margin. Over the past decade, 574 wildfires have been recorded. This is a Highland issue—it is important to say that—but it is also a national issue with consequences for all of Scotland.

The problem is clear in Moray, too. This year alone, multiple incidents have underlined the urgency with which action is required. Moray Council, in a decision led by councillors Kathleen Robertson and Derek Ross, became the first council to take action in Scotland, agreeing a motion in August that recognised the devastation that has been caused by wildfires in the summer of 2025. The council committed to hold a wildfire summit, to consider new byelaws and to seek funding for wildfires from both Governments, just as other climate-driven challenges such as flooding and coastal erosion are already funded.

In recognising this trend, I also, as my colleagues have done, recognise those who stand on the front line. I pay huge tribute to the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service for its professionalism and bravery in the most challenging of circumstances. It deserves the thanks of the Parliament and the whole country.

Equally, much of the immediate response came not from the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service but from those who are closest to the land: gamekeepers—including our young gamekeepers—farmers, estate staff and local volunteers. Scottish Land & Estates reported that 33 businesses, including 27 estates, provided vital assistance during the wildfires in late June alone. Private land managers deployed equipment worth an estimated £3.1 million to contain the flames. Those contributions were not optional; they were essential.

Wildfires put human lives in danger. They devastate habitats and wildlife. They damage farming, sporting estates and tourism, and they place immense strain on rural communities. I urge everyone to remember that caution is essential during dry weather. A cigarette, a barbecue or even a spark from machinery can cause untold damage. The evidence is clear, the trends are undeniable, and I ask the Government to seriously consider the threat that we face.

In my opinion, Scotland needs a dedicated wildfire response unit with specialist training, modern equipment and, crucially, aerial firefighting support. That is how we will protect our communities, our land and our future.

13:30

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): I thank Emma Roddick for bringing this very important issue to the chamber for debate. It is important to remember that wildfire risk exists across Scotland. Nowhere is immune, and that will only become more obvious as we experience more frequent extreme weather events. Aberdeen is already familiar with the problem, with the Gramps—Tullos Hill—going up in flames again this year, and almost all of Scotland was categorised as having a high risk of wildfires in the summer months.

A key difference when a fire takes hold in the city of Aberdeen, compared with one on Dava moor or elsewhere around the Highlands, is that there is peat in the Highlands, which can continue burning for days or, more often than not, weeks. Land managers and gamekeepers know that. They know where the peat is and they know how to deal with it. I spend a lot of time in Emma Roddick's beautiful region, as well as in rural Aberdeenshire, and I have seen for myself the

expertise that exists in people's roles. Sadly, that expertise is often overlooked in a crisis, and that is to our detriment. However committed our fire brigade workers are, they will not know the ins and outs of what is happening with the ground where the most flammable vegetation is, and they will not know where the ground might be more resistant to catching, in the same way that someone who is out there every single day tending to it will.

I support Emma Roddick's comments about ensuring that the SFRS has the correct equipment available, but I urge our vital emergency services personnel to consider the value of what land managers and gamekeepers have to offer in a crisis, too. From knowing where natural fire breaks have been placed to being intimately aware of the most effective access points for emergency vehicles, their input is not just nice to have, it is crucial for fast action and fire resilience. That expertise is crucial in fire prevention as well as for the response.

Knowledge of how to safely carry out muirburn and prevent the build-up of dry vegetation is knowledge that we cannot afford to lose. We hear a lot about muirburn in wildfire discussions. Carried out responsibly in accordance with the muirburn code, it can be very effective in preventing wildfires from taking hold. I recognise that the Government is having to balance a lot of very important concerns when it comes to muirburn licensing, but I hope that consideration will be given to the issue and to how best to support those carrying out muirburn in any reviews of our wildfire policy.

I welcome the cross-party nature of the debate and my colleagues' calls for a collective effort to find a way forward for wildfire prevention and effective response, but that will be incomplete without direct engagement with Scotland's gamekeepers—on-the-ground professionals whose knowledge can help us to build the resilience that we need in rural communities.

Wildfires are a relevant issue to everyone in this country, and nowhere is immune from the risk, as Aberdeen knows. The increased potential for wildfires in rural areas and their capacity for destroying livelihoods and natural environments that we in urban areas rely on—whether in a broad sense of offsetting our carbon emissions and supporting biodiversity, which our cities struggle to maintain, or closer to home in the sense of getting food into our shops and on to our tables—should concern us and should provoke action from us all.

13:24

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I, too, congratulate Emma Roddick on securing the debate. I do not agree with every word in her

motion, but I supported it because I wanted to make sure that there was cross-party support so that we could at least have the debate.

Over the summer, I wrote to my friend and colleague Finlay Carson, who is convener of the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee, asking that a committee of the Parliament look at the issue, because it is of such great importance to both the Highlands and the rest of Scotland. What we witnessed in the early summer months was a horrific fire. I will not forget the scenes—or my kids' reaction when the sky went extremely dark in the middle of the day. It was a terrifying experience for those of us who were many miles away, and I know how bad it was for the people who were right at the centre of it.

On the day of that fire, I wrote to the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs, in her role of leading on resilience, asking her to activate the Scottish Government's resilience room. She refused to do that, although she sent me helpful updates, which I appreciate. I do not understand why the biggest-ever wildfire in Scotland did not trigger the need for the Scottish Government's resilience room to be launched and opened. I know that the minister wanted to intervene on Fergus Ewing on that; I will give way to him if he wants to make the point now, or he may do so in his closing remarks. The point is important.

Ben Macpherson mentioned the wildfire on Arthur's Seat. That was serious. However, it got an immediate response from the First Minister, who was tweeting about it within minutes or hours. We got nothing from the First Minister of Scotland when the biggest-ever wildfire was affecting our communities in the north. I hope that the Government will reflect on that, because our words mean a lot and I was surprised that the Government was silent on the issue.

The ones who were not silent and who did not stand back were the firefighters, the gamekeepers, the farm labourers and the estate workers. I will be very clear: it was a horrendous wildfire that was threatening to get out of control. It was brought under control only because of the incredible efforts of those people, and because of mother nature—because we had one of the biggest rain storms that I can remember. The relief was palpable in Moray and the Highlands on that day. I had been worried that the wildfire would get out of control.

Fergus Ewing: Does Mr Ross agree with a keeper who told me that, had it not been for muirburn that was carried out in past years on the Muckrach estate, the fire would have reached Grantown and people would have died?

Douglas Ross: Yes, I agree, because I, too, have heard that.

Over the summer, I met representatives and owners of Moray estates, which are probably some of the biggest to be affected by the fire. To see the scale of devastation over the work that they have put into that area for so long is, to be frank, heartbreaking. We were extremely lucky that no lives were lost, but we lost much work that had been done to develop our peatlands and woodlands over many years—perhaps 30 years. All of it was lost in those fires.

I want a better response from the Scottish Government. I agree with Edward Mountain's point about assets. I was perhaps naive: I assumed that the Scottish Government and the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service had assets such as helicopters that could come in and put water on the wildfires. I always assumed that those assets were Government or Fire and Rescue Service assets, but they were not. Those assets were used because estates spend a lot of money on insurance and can afford the use of those helicopters. If it was not for that, we would have been in an even worse state.

Finally, I will talk about something that is not a wildfire. We have been experiencing too many deliberate fires in Moray. In Lossiemouth, a spate of them have been worrying close to homes and individuals. One young person has now been arrested and charged. Since the Minister for Victims and Community Safety is here, I say that I want tougher punishments for people who wilfully set fires, because of the damage that they do.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I thank all members for their co-operation, which has allowed me to give all members an equal opportunity to participate in a heavily subscribed debate.

I call the minister to respond to the debate.

13:38

The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie): I thank Emma Roddick for bringing this extremely important members' business debate to the chamber. I will touch on some of the points that she made.

The increase in the frequency and intensity of wildfires in Scotland is not just a seasonal hazard but a stark warning to all of us. The fires are placing immense pressure on our rural communities and emergency services, devastating our landscapes, threatening our biodiversity and our rural livelihoods, and damaging critical infrastructure. All those points have been well made by colleagues across the parties.

Finlay Carson noted the excellent collaboration between farmers and keepers. He is absolutely correct that the fire would not have been brought

under control without the sterling efforts of all the land managers and land workers who were there.

The member talked about cuts to the fire service, as did the Labour member—I am sorry, but her name has gone out of my head. I say to them that there were no cuts to service delivery. The service delivery review is not about cuts, and no decisions have been made. The SFRS has said that, if it had an unlimited budget, it would still be carrying out the review, so it is not talking about cuts.

Emma Harper mentioned sky lanterns. Unfortunately, they are becoming fashionable again, so I will add my voice to hers and ask people not to use them. Not only do they choke livestock; they have the potential to burn areas, which could then lead to wildfires.

I thank Fergus Ewing for his phone call on 29 June. The fire started on 28 June and Mr Ewing phoned me the next day. I greatly appreciate the fact that he did so. He asked me to activate SGoRR. It was not within my gift to do so at that time, but the cabinet secretary gave me clear guidance and understanding that that step was not needed, because local resilience groups had already been set up.

I immediately phoned Angela Constance, Richard Lochhead, the Deputy First Minister, National Farmers Union Scotland, Scottish Land & Estates and the Scottish Gamekeepers Association to find out what the position was from people who were on the ground dealing with the fire at that time.

I had a holiday in the three weeks leading to my visit to Dava moor.

Douglas Ross: Will the minister take an intervention?

Jim Fairlie: No, I will not.

The week after I came back, I attended the game fair and spoke to young keepers to get their perception of what had actually happened. I then attended the site with the keepers who had been on the ground at the time and also with representatives of the Cairngorms National Park Authority and NatureScot, officials from SFRS and other locals. We went on to have other meetings, and I have since met people from the SGA, SLE, RSPB and the Cairngorms National Park Authority.

It was therefore an example of really cheap politics when Tim Eagle sat on the BBC and said that I was turning up for a photo op. If we are to have co-operation, that kind of childish politics really has to be taken out of the—

Tim Eagle: Will the minister take an intervention?

Jim Fairlie: No. I will be taking no interventions from any of you.

Tim Eagle: And you are telling me I am cheap?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Eagle.

Jim Fairlie: What will be happening as we go forward? On 25 September, there will be a series of SFRS debriefs. The Scottish multi-agency resilience training and exercising unit will have a debrief on 1 October and the public sector will have one on 9 October. There will be a stakeholders' meeting on 14 October, which will include me and the cabinet secretary.

Emma Roddick also talked about having byelaws to prevent people from using or buying barbecues. I get that idea, and it is something that we are looking at. Cairngorms national park has byelaws, approval of which sits with the minister. I absolutely accept that that idea should be looked at, but there are legal considerations that we have to take into account. That is one of the serious things that has to be done in government.

As far as the helicopters are concerned, I absolutely share people's concerns that we were not able to call on helicopters right there and then. That is one of the areas that we will consider as we move forward.

Emma Roddick: Can I press the minister on the legal considerations? Could he lay out exactly what they are? There is conflicting information out there, and people have the right to be able to scrutinise those reasons and push for badly needed action.

Jim Fairlie: We will get to all those points, including the one that Emma Roddick has just made, as we go through all the reviews that I have laid out for members today.

As far as the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service's equipment is concerned, we have announced a £1.6 million funding package that will go towards providing the equipment that is needed—the fogging units, the all-terrain vehicles to get people there and the trailers to get those vehicles to the sites. Those things are in train—they are all part of the process that is going on at the moment. I make that point because we take every single bit of this issue very seriously. Wildfire is a danger and it is present—it is here right now—so we have to make sure that we have resilience measures in place.

Ariane Burgess talked about being able to address wildfires through landscape management. She is correct to a certain extent, but I point out that every single type of landscape in the area—no matter whether it was part of a managed moor, moorland, wetland or rewilded land—was burned through, because the wildfire could not be brought under control.

The one point that I will agree with Douglas Ross on is that, had it not been for the keepers who were on the ground—and a great big plowt of rain—the fire would not have been stopped when it was.

To go back to another of Fergus Ewing's points, the local resilience group was set up and locals were contacted by it, as far as I am aware. If getting information to local people is an issue that we have to look at, I am absolutely prepared to take that to our future discussions.

I have laid out what the Government has done. To turn to the actions that we will take going forward, I am still working with organisations such as Scottish Land & Estates, the Scottish Gamekeepers Association, NFU Scotland and the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service to ensure that we get everything right. All those organisations will be in the room so that we can have such conversations. We will have those summits, and I am determined to rebuild our relationships with our keepers and land managers to ensure that we have co-operation.

I put on record my thanks to everyone concerned, including the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service and everyone else who came out and helped to deal with the fires.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, minister. That concludes the debate. I thank members for their co-operation, which allowed the debate to be concluded with everyone having had the chance to participate and also allowed time for parliamentary staff to prepare the chamber for this afternoon's business.

13:46

Meeting suspended.

14:00

On resuming—

Motion of Condolence

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-18531, in the name of John Swinney, on a motion of condolence following the death of George Reid.

The Rt Hon Sir George Reid was held in high esteem by all, regardless of party and regardless of position. Elected Deputy Presiding Officer when the Parliament was established in 1999, George was then elected our second Presiding Officer in 2003—the only member of the Scottish Parliament to date to hold office as both a Deputy Presiding Officer and a Presiding Officer.

George's dedication to public service and caring for others was demonstrated throughout his life. He loved representing the people of Clackmannanshire, both as a member of Parliament and an MSP. Dedicated to his local area, but internationalist in outlook, George's life, service and influence as a journalist, a humanitarian leader and an elected representative reached far beyond these borders.

George loved Scotland and the Scottish Parliament. He served the Parliament as he served in all his roles—with dignity, dedication and determination. He drove forward the completion of this building with tenacity and commitment. He was immensely proud of it, and he delighted in people being welcomed into their Parliament. As an MSP staff member, as an MSP and as Presiding Officer, he offered me friendly support.

We are honoured today to welcome George's wife Daphne, his daughter Morag and other members of his family to Parliament. We share your loss, and we hope that you find some comfort and encouragement in the many tributes to a life so very well lived. George's manner of service—a unique combination of courtesy, humour and seriousness—was his mark. We will miss him, and we will remember him with deep affection and gratitude.

14:02

The First Minister (John Swinney): It is with enormous sadness but also with the warmest of heartfelt thanks that I rise to move the motion in my name to honour a true giant of my party, of this Parliament and of Scottish public life, Sir George Reid. I express my condolences and those of the people of Scotland to his wife Dee, to his daughter Morag, to his son-in-law Pete and to his grandchildren, and I welcome members of the family who join us in the gallery today.

Born in Tullibody, in the shadow of his beloved Ochil hills, George was a proud son of the wee county, a passionate advocate for the people and the communities of Clackmannanshire, and destined to make a huge impact on the lives of others far beyond Clackmannanshire's borders.

George was a distinguished journalist, academic, parliamentarian, humanitarian and public servant. As the last surviving member of the trailblazing group of Scottish National Party MPs elected in 1974, George was so proud to have served his home county both at Westminster and here in the Scottish Parliament, an institution that he dedicated so much of his life to establishing.

Although this Parliament reconvened in 1999, it truly came of age under George Reid's tenure as Presiding Officer. That stewardship reminded us that this Parliament and this country are at their best when we look outwards, not inwards. His finest speech in this Parliament was in the debate on the Iraq war in 2003, when he cautioned:

"The war has already claimed its first victim, which is the truth."—[*Official Report*, 13 March 2003; c 16446.]

Railing against that sentiment was not just something that George thought or said, or would have had others do; it was a value that he put into practice throughout his life.

His humanitarian and international outlook was at the heart of his life and work. He played a central role in the media coverage of the Ethiopian famine and worked tirelessly to provide assistance through the Red Cross and Red Crescent around the world.

He used his remarkable knowledge, his experience and his intellect as a professorial fellow at the University of Stirling, teaching on international conflict and co-operation for the learning of others. That was typical of George.

Although an inspiring and captivating speaker, he was never content just to speak. He was always determined to act, to make a real difference and to use his huge intellect, his drive and his compassion for others to make the world a better place.

It was that determination that he brought to bear so effectively here in this Parliament. Those of us who served during his time as Presiding Officer will remember the extraordinary leadership that he provided, putting aside party and working truly in the national interest, ending the early struggles and controversies and truly cementing our Parliament's place as the centre of the political life of the nation. When the history of this Parliament is written, the role played by George Reid will be at its heart because he was a true statesman, a man whose life's work was devoted to, and has benefited, the whole nation of Scotland.

His unique and exemplary commitment to public service was recognised in his appointment by Her late Majesty Queen Elizabeth as Lord High Commissioner to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland and to the Order of the Thistle, one of the ancient symbols of our nationhood.

George's political life was anchored in his drive to secure for Scotland her place as an outward-looking, equal and independent member of the family of nations. As a teenager, I heard his arguments for that cause. His advocacy—and that of his peers Winnie Ewing, Gordon Wilson and Margaret Ewing—for Scotland and for independence shaped the political convictions that I have held for my entire adult life. Throughout my parliamentary service, George Reid was a source of wise counsel and steadfast support. Leadership can be a lonely place, but I was always strengthened in exercising leadership by the encouragement and the deepest of loyalty of George Reid.

So it was when I visited George for the last time in July. Knowing that his life would soon come to an end, I listened to a wise man at peace with himself and as assured as any of us can ever be that he had led a fulfilled life of joy, of service and of love. I feel immensely privileged that my life was enhanced by knowing George Reid and benefiting from his counsel. I would like to end this tribute by reflecting on a section of George's 1995 Donaldson lecture, an exposition of values and political thought that stands as a defining contribution to the development of my party and of modern Scottish politics. In that lecture, George said:

"Our future cannot be a continuation of our past. Too often, we Scots are concerned about the day before yesterday."

Instead, he implores us

"to say, with a sense of purpose, 'Today is tomorrow.'"

With those words, George encourages us to use today to secure the future, to think optimistically of what might be possible and to pursue a common determination to shape and improve Scotland's future. I commit today to doing that and, in so doing, I hope that that can be the on-going tribute of us all to the life and legacy of Sir George Reid.

I move,

That the Parliament expresses its profound sadness at the death of George Reid; extends its deepest sympathy and sincere condolences to his family and friends; appreciates the many years of public service that he gave as an MP, MSP, Presiding Officer, and Lord Lieutenant; recognises the substantial contribution that he made to the establishment of the Scottish Parliament and the securing of its place in the life of the nation, and acknowledges his humanitarian work over many decades and the high regard in which he was held by colleagues across the world.

[Applause.]

14:08

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I think I am now the only Conservative member to have served in this Parliament when Sir George Reid was Presiding Officer, and it is my honour to offer a few remarks in support of this motion of condolence.

I first met Sir George Reid when I came into this Parliament in 2001. At that point, he held the position of Deputy Presiding Officer, but I was aware of his history, his already having had a distinguished career in journalism and broadcasting, having been a member of Parliament in Westminster and more recently having worked for the International Committee of the Red Cross.

He made relatively few speeches during that first session of Parliament but, as we have already heard, when he did contribute, often on the international matters on which he had considerable expertise, his contributions always carried a great deal of authority. Whether or not one agreed with him, he was always someone worth listening to.

When Sir David Steel retired as Presiding Officer at the end of the first session, George was the natural successor to take over. It was a role that he was made for, as someone who had just the right level of gravitas and authority, as well as good humour, a twinkle in his eye and kindness towards individuals.

The second parliamentary session, which he presided over, became known as the rainbow Parliament, as it contained a motley assortment of smaller parties, including, most notably, a cluster of representatives from the Scottish Socialist Party. That brought a level of rhetoric and parliamentary disruption that had not been seen before and which has not been seen since—so far, at least. As the occupant of the chair, George tolerated that with as much good grace as he could muster, although, occasionally, one could not but notice a wry smile on his lips in reaction to what he was hearing and seeing.

His most significant contribution as Presiding Officer was to sort out the mess that the construction of this building had become. At that point, the project was years behind schedule and hundreds of millions of pounds over budget. Simply by the force of his personality and with his leadership, he pulled the whole thing together to ensure that the building was ready in time for the planned royal opening by the late Queen Elizabeth. It says in St Paul's cathedral, in tribute to Sir Christopher Wren, "If you look for his monument, look around you." We can say that of this building, which is really a monument to Sir

George Reid. Without his intervention, I fear that construction works might still be going on.

On retiring from Parliament in 2007, George went on to hold a number of significant roles. Unlike many in his party, he did not have an instinctive objection to the honours system and was pleased to accept the knighthood that was conferred on him by the late Queen Elizabeth, which was a fitting recognition of his years of public service. He went on to serve as the lord-lieutenant of his much-loved home county of Clackmannanshire and as the Queen's representative as the Lord High Commissioner to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland.

My wife and I were delighted to be hosted during that year's general assembly by George and Dee at Holyrood palace. For the duration of the general assembly, the Lord High Commissioner is treated, in effect, as a member of the royal family, living in the palace, being waited on by retainers, wining and dining on the finest of fare every night, and being driven around in a large limousine with the royal pennant flying on the wing, accompanied by police motorcycle outriders. I do not think that I am being unkind when I say that I think that George perhaps enjoyed that experience just a little bit too much.

I will always remember George for his kindness and friendship to me personally, as well as his many achievements in public life. He will be sadly missed. On behalf of the Scottish Conservatives, I offer my condolences to Dee and Morag and all the family. *[Applause.]*

14:12

Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab): On behalf of the Scottish Labour Party, I want to associate all my colleagues with the First Minister's comments and put on record our deep sorrow at the passing of Sir George Reid, who was a public servant of remarkable skill, intelligence and commitment.

George Reid led a life that was dedicated to serving the people of our country and committed to making Scotland a better place. Many MSPs will have warm memories of George's time in this Parliament. Although that will be especially true of Scottish National Party members, that will not be exclusively the case. I know from lots of stories from those who served alongside Sir George how respected he was across every party in the Parliament.

George served diligently, including as Deputy Presiding Officer and later as Presiding Officer, but his time in this Parliament was only one tiny part of a remarkable career. George's remarkable life took him far from his Clackmannanshire home to places around the world, from America to Armenia, always in the service of others.

After graduating from the University of St Andrews, George embarked on a career in journalism, in the course of which he worked for the BBC and Granada Television, as well as many of Scotland's flagship newspapers. Given that he was a person of strong political convictions, it was not long before George made the move into front-line politics. George was a committed Scottish nationalist. He joined the SNP as a young man when the party had little support in the country, and he was later elected as part of the SNP wave that was produced by the twin elections in 1974. He served his Clackmannanshire and East Stirlingshire constituents diligently over the turbulent years of the late 1970s, which included the rise of the Tories under Margaret Thatcher and the winter of discontent.

After leaving the Parliament in 1979, George returned to journalism, this time marrying his professional expertise with his vast experience of the world. George will be remembered as being a Scottish nationalist, but he was without a doubt an internationalist, as well—a man who cared deeply for the freedom and safety of, and justice for, all his fellow citizens, wherever they were across the globe. It was in that role that he performed some of his most lasting and important work. As has been mentioned, he produced the groundbreaking reports on the Ethiopian famine that awakened the world to the struggles and horrors that were being inflicted on the people of that country. Those reports moved so many people across the world that they led directly to Live Aid and the beginning of famine relief. After that, he worked for the International Committee of the Red Cross in Geneva. His work on supporting victims of the 1988 Armenian earthquake resulted in George receiving state honours from Armenia and the USSR.

When the campaign for devolution was won, George was ready to return to politics and to serve the people of Scotland. Sadly, I did not have the honour of serving in the Parliament at the same time as George, but I had the honour and privilege of meeting him on a number of occasions. What I remember most about Sir George is that, despite not being in the same party as me, he was nothing other than warm, compassionate and encouraging. I know that that was the case with many young people—and maybe older people—he met in politics across the years. He was always warm, always compassionate and always encouraging. That is the man we will remember so fondly. Indeed, it is that George—intelligent, patriotic, compassionate and warm—the Parliament and Scotland mourn today.

I again share the Scottish Labour Party's condolences on the death of Sir George Reid. Our thoughts are with Dee, Morag, his family, his many

friends and the many colleagues who knew him and loved him so dearly. *[Applause.]*

14:16

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): I join colleagues across the Parliament—members and staff—in mourning the loss of Sir George Reid and in celebrating his life. We send our condolences and love to Dee, Morag and the family—not forgetting the dogs, of course.

George led a remarkable life as a journalist, politician, humanitarian and academic. He was a true polymath, and he drew on his unique breadth of experience to touch the lives of so many. Every chapter of his career left a lasting legacy. He remains the only MSP to have received the Soviet medal of honour for his outstanding work with the International Committee of the Red Cross in leading the response to the Armenian earthquake in 1988.

I first met him when I was a very nervous new MSP in 2003. We had lunch. I said that I had voted for him to be my constituency MSP and that I would be voting for him again to become the Presiding Officer of this Parliament. He was so warm and generous, and he was full of useful advice, which was offered kindly—and sometimes very directly. He helped me to make sense of those early days in the Parliament, and I know that many other MSPs also benefited from his mentoring. Later, when I lost my seat at Holyrood, I valued his encouragement, which, again, drew on his personal experience of moving between so many different roles, both in and out of politics.

I recently met his colleagues at the University of Stirling, where he worked right up until the final few weeks of his life—teaching, mentoring and challenging students, while drawing on that vast experience. I learned how his work had helped them, just as he had helped me and so many others.

We remember fondly how George could hold any gathering in the palm of his hand. He had a natural and formidable power of convenership—an essential skill in that rainbow Parliament of the second session, when shenanigans were rife. We remember how he chaired a major global conference in the Parliament, opening proceedings in not just one but two African languages before addressing delegates in Gaelic and then, finally, in English—it was classic George. His wit, charisma and gravitas could lift any gathering, however small, into a major event, making people feel special and connected to one another. I remember attending dinners with international delegations that George hosted in his role as PO. They were enthralling. He would pull every thread of conversation in the room together,

ensuring that no one was left behind. You had to sing for your supper, but you always left feeling part of something a wee bit special.

I have met so many staff in this building who loved working with George, in his time both as an MSP and then as Presiding Officer. Arguably, his greatest achievement in politics was steering this building—this village, as he loved to call it—to its completion. George was the right person at the right time to navigate the huge challenges of getting the building project on track and communicating that to a critical media. From the start, he brought his forensic attention to detail, demanding weekly updates of Gantt charts and critical paths, and he chivvied contractors to completion while delivering endless walk-throughs and interviews in multiple languages, explaining the challenges and progress of the project.

Colleagues remember a kind, shrewd, organised and tireless leader. We can only imagine what might have been if he had been able to take a more central role in the yes campaign for independence.

We celebrate the unique and remarkable life of Sir George Reid, a proud son of the wee county—much loved, and now much missed. *[Applause.]*

14:21

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): It is a tremendous privilege to pay tribute to Sir George Reid on behalf of the Scottish Liberal Democrats. His passing marks the loss of one of the most substantial figures in the life of the Parliament and the life of Scotland.

I met George only a handful of times, and only fleetingly, but I was always in awe of him and he was always generous with that time. I saw, from the outside, what this chamber meant to Sir George and, over time, what he would come to mean to the chamber.

He was a man of great intellect, deep compassion and integrity. From those roots in Tullibody, he never lost his pride in Clackmannanshire. He never forgot where he came from or what was behind him, but he was always looking forward and outward—a profound internationalist.

As we have heard, his career in journalism led him to the very heart of global events. In the Red Cross, he found not just a vocation but a calling. Working in places of conflict and of catastrophe, he brought humanity and hope where both were in short supply. He would later say that it was in that work that he did

“far more good than at any other time in”
his life.

In politics, George made his mark twice: first at Westminster, and then here in Holyrood. As Presiding Officer in the years between 2003 and 2007, he took the chair—as we have heard several times this afternoon—at a very difficult time for the fledgling Parliament. The Holyrood project was mired in delay and controversy, but Sir George always brought order, authority and dignity. He was determined—as he said—to move in and move on, and he succeeded.

By the time that he laid down the mace that sits before you, Presiding Officer, this Parliament was not just complete as a building; it was established in the minds of the Scottish people as the beating heart of the nation's democracy.

Sir George was a man of principle, who was never afraid to speak truth plainly. As the First Minister rightly mentioned, his speech on the Iraq war, which was informed by his years of humanitarian service, was one of the finest that I have ever heard in the chamber, and I found such common cause with the words that he spoke that day.

Sir George was knighted in 2012 for his service to public life, but the honour that mattered most to him, as exemplified by his life's work, was the chance to serve his community, his country and the cause of humanity.

On behalf of my party, I extend our profound condolences to his wife, Dee, to his daughter Morag and her family and to all those who mourn him today. *[Applause.]*

The Presiding Officer: The question is, that motion S6M-18531, in the name of John Swinney, on a motion of condolence, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament expresses its profound sadness at the death of George Reid; extends its deepest sympathy and sincere condolences to his family and friends; appreciates the many years of public service that he gave as an MP, MSP, Presiding Officer, and Lord Lieutenant; recognises the substantial contribution that he made to the establishment of the Scottish Parliament and the securing of its place in the life of the nation, and acknowledges his humanitarian work over many decades and the high regard in which he was held by colleagues across the world.

The Presiding Officer: I will suspend the meeting briefly before we move to the next item of business.

14:24

Meeting suspended.

14:26

On resuming—

Portfolio Question Time

Education and Skills

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is portfolio question time. On this occasion, the portfolio is education and skills. I remind members that questions 2 and 7 have been grouped and that, therefore, I will take any supplementaries on those questions after the substantive questions have been asked and answered. There is quite a bit of interest in supplementaries, so the usual plea stands for brevity in questions and answers.

Education Infrastructure Investment

1. Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how much it has invested in education infrastructure since 2011. (S6O-04954)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): The Scottish Government recognises the importance of education infrastructure as a foundation for delivering high-quality learning environments, supporting wellbeing and enabling long-term economic and social benefits. That is why, since 2011, we have invested significant funding of £2.8 billion in Scotland's education estate. That investment has led to the proportion of schools in a good or satisfactory condition increasing from 62.7 per cent in 2007 to a record 92 per cent today. Our funding through the learning estate investment programme is helping to build on that remarkable progress.

Gordon MacDonald: I welcome the new, state-of-the-art Currie community high school, which opened at the start of the academic year in my constituency of Edinburgh Pentlands. Will the cabinet secretary outline when young people in the Wester Hailes area will have the opportunity to benefit from the new Wester Hailes high school, which is currently under construction?

Jenny Gilruth: I thank Gordon MacDonald for his question and look forward to attending the official opening of Currie community high school in November.

On his substantive point, I understand that the redevelopment of Wester Hailes high school is under way and that completion is expected in autumn 2026. As I mentioned in my previous response, the Government will provide further funding to the City of Edinburgh Council through the learning estate investment programme, with funding of £16.8 million for that ambitious

transformation, which will create lasting benefits for young people and the wider community.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There are a number of supplementaries. I will fit in as many as I can.

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): The cabinet secretary will know about the funding that the Scottish Government has given to Moray Council for a replacement Forres academy. That is very welcome, but there are significant concerns about the siting of the new school. Can the cabinet secretary confirm that the money has been allocated to Moray Council, that the siting is a local decision and that, should the council decide to move the school to an alternative venue, that would not put the funding under threat?

Jenny Gilruth: I understand the challenges in relation to the new high school in Forres, and I am more than happy to write to the member on the specifics. I understand that the location is a matter for the local authority, but I will write to the member in due course to give him a specific answer.

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): In Glasgow, a group of primary school pupils is campaigning because their school is not accessible for people who use wheelchairs and the outdoor shelter has been deemed unsafe. This week, data showed that more than 100 schools have not had their expected five-year suitability survey, which includes surveying suitability under the Equality Act 2010 and suitability of access. In the light of that, will the cabinet secretary say when every school will have a survey, ensure that there is the necessary investment and support, and work with the council to make sure that schools in Glasgow are accessible and that their playground shelters are safe?

Jenny Gilruth: The specific issue that the member raises is a matter for Glasgow City Council, as the local authority, in the first instance. However, she also raises a hugely important point in relation to accessibility. I am more than happy to ask my officials to engage with Glasgow City Council on the specifics of her question and to get back to the member in due course.

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): As a former councillor who campaigned and fought alongside the community, I can report that the new facilities in Currie are quite special. However, the campus is far from complete. Following the demolition of the old building, the ambitious plans to create outdoor learning spaces and first-class sports facilities are under threat. Will the cabinet secretary meet me and parents to understand the need for the ambitious campus to be delivered as promised, following the successful community campaign to keep both Currie and Wester Hailes

high schools in the heart of their respective communities?

Jenny Gilruth: Ms Webber raises an important point, and I am more than happy to meet her and campaigners. We have provided the City of Edinburgh Council with significant funding for both schools. Since 2021, we have provided total funding of £64 million towards the construction of four new schools. I am more than happy to meet the member and campaigners in relation to the points that she has made.

Children (Withdrawal from Religious Education and Amendment of UNCRC Compatibility Duty) (Scotland) Bill

2. Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government for what reason the Children (Withdrawal from Religious Education and Amendment of UNCRC Compatibility Duty) (Scotland) Bill aims to give school pupils an independent right to opt in, but not opt out, of religious observance. (S6O-04955)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): The bill, in its current form, will strengthen the rights of children and young people in Scotland, building on our commitment to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. The changes aim to strike a balance between that commitment, parental rights, the wide range of stakeholder views and the practicality of implementing the changes for schools. The approach represents a clear improvement in the consideration of children's and young people's views on withdrawal from religious observance. In accordance with current guidance, schools should already take an inclusive approach to religious observance, reflecting the diversity of faith and belief in the school community.

Emma Roddick: There is a fundamental inequality in that. Although the bill gives school pupils the right to overrule their parents in order to opt in to religious observance, non-religious children will still need parental permission to opt out. That creates a hierarchy of beliefs, with the views of religious pupils being taken more seriously than those of non-religious children and young people. Why is that? Will the cabinet secretary address that worrying bias, or are religious children's views officially more valid than the views of those who do not hold those beliefs?

Jenny Gilruth: I do not agree with the substantive final point of Emma Roddick's question. I am more than happy to engage with the member on that point. Today, my private office has reached out to all members of the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee, which will be considering the bill in due course, to offer to engage directly. I met the Humanist Society only last week to hear some of the points that Emma

Roddick has raised. The point that I made in my initial response is that it is important that the Government strikes a balance in relation to the rights of parents and the rights of children and young people. We need to be mindful of that balance and of it potentially becoming out of kilter.

The aim of the bill is to ensure that, in the context of the long-standing parental right to withdraw a child from religious observance, children's and young people's views are given due weight in that process. I think that that was the member's substantive point, and the provisions in the bill reflect that aim. It is a technical bill that aims to strengthen our alignment with the UNCRC, and it will put the position in relation to ministers' UNCRC obligations in this area beyond doubt. As I said, I am more than happy to meet members, and the committee will consider the bill in due course.

"Preaching is not Teaching"

7. Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of the recently published report by Humanist Society Scotland, "Preaching is not Teaching", regarding concerns that pupils in non-denominational schools may feel compelled to take part in religious worship activities against their own wishes. (S6O-04960)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): The Scottish Government welcomes the Humanist Society's report, which helpfully adds to the literature regarding current practice of religious observance—or RO—and the right of parents to withdraw pupils from it. Evidence shows how inclusive and pluralistic religious observance can support all pupils' spiritual and moral development. I met with the Humanist Society last week and have asked it to share further information on its examples of RO not being delivered inclusively. Guidance is clear that religious observance should be inclusive for those of all faiths and none.

Elena Whitham: I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests as a member of the Humanist Society Scotland.

Given that more than 70 per cent of Scottish pupils now identify as non-religious or as having non-Christian beliefs, I am deeply concerned that non-denominational schools are still able to deliver an exclusively Christian programme of religious observance. In the report, one parent explained that their child was pressured to pray out loud and reprimanded for choosing to stay quiet, leaving her distressed and ashamed. Does the cabinet secretary agree that that represents a clear failure to respect a child's right to their own beliefs—a fundamental human right that is protected under the UNCRC—and that pupils should be given the

ability to independently opt out of religious observance?

Jenny Gilruth: I, too, am concerned by some of the issues that have been raised in the Humanist Society Scotland report. As I mentioned, I discussed those with the society last week. As I said, I have asked the society whether it can share further information on the examples that the member has cited in order to look at whether more can be done to ensure that religious observance is delivered inclusively in all schools.

The experience of the young person who was mentioned in the question does not sound consistent at all with the guidance that religious observance in schools should be sensitive to all spiritual needs and beliefs and be inclusive for those of all faiths and none. I would be happy for the member to write to me with further details, but, as I said, I have asked the Humanist Society Scotland for further detail in relation to that matter.

As I mentioned, the Scottish Government has engaged with a wide range of stakeholders on the bill's proposals, and I will continue to engage with members as the bill makes its way through Parliament.

Higher Education Sector (Dispute)

3. Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what interventions it has made to end the current dispute over jobs and cuts in the higher education sector. (S6O-04956)

The Minister for Higher and Further Education; and Minister for Veterans (Graeme Dey): Although universities are autonomous institutions with responsibility for their own operational and staffing matters, I have continued to encourage university leaders to engage constructively with trade unions and to seek resolution to local disputes in line with fair work principles. That should include meaningful staff consultation on the potential impact of their cost-saving programmes and working together with staff and trade unions to ensure that workers are treated fairly. Compulsory redundancies should be considered only as a last resort, after all other cost-saving measures have been fully explored.

Richard Leonard: I thank the minister for that reply. The University of Edinburgh is our largest university and one of the most prestigious. It is currently in dispute with the University and College Union over job losses and a failure to rule out compulsory redundancies. UCU members took strike action on Friday 20 June and a further five days from 8 September. While senior managers held dispute resolution talks with the UCU on 12 June, ahead of the first strike day, and met the joint unions on 24 July, the university has made no

effort since then to meet with the UCU and is instead moving ahead with job cuts through so-called targeted voluntary redundancy. How does the minister believe this fits with the Scottish Government's fair work first principles and the fair work dimensions of effective voice, security and respect?

Graeme Dey: I have already outlined what our expectations are around these matters. Richard Leonard paints a picture with a very specific interpretation of what is happening at the University of Edinburgh. He will appreciate that I am not fully sighted on the detail that he has outlined. However, I undertake, through the Scottish Funding Council, to seek to explore the very points that he has made, and I will come back to the member on that.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): The signs of stress in the higher education system are clear, as Richard Leonard has set out. Does the minister accept that the current financial model for higher education is broken? Will he set out what discussions he has had with Universities Scotland and others about a potential new financial model?

Graeme Dey: As Willie Rennie is aware, there have been on-going discussions with the sector about that very point: looking to a more sustainable long-term financial model. In fact, I hope that we will be able to make a joint announcement in the next few weeks that will outline the detail of that.

I offer a reassurance, which perhaps goes to the concerns that Richard Leonard has articulated, that, whatever process is followed and whatever the direction of travel is, trade unions, staff and students will also be able to input to that process, because I absolutely recognise that we need to move to a more sustainable long-term model for our institutions.

Additional Support for Learning (Rural Schools)

4. **Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what steps it is taking to ensure that pupils attending smaller rural schools are receiving the additional support for learning that they need. (S6O-04957)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): All children and young people should receive the support that they need to reach their full potential. Local authorities oversee the delivery of education and they have a statutory duty to identify the need for, provide and review support for pupils with additional support needs in their local community, including in schools in rural areas. Spending on additional support for learning by local authorities reached a record high of more than £1 billion in 2023-24, and

the 2025-26 budget sets out a further £29 million of additional investment by the Scottish Government for ASN.

Oliver Mundell: On behalf of parents, pupils and teachers, I ask the cabinet secretary: what are they to do when that does not happen? In Dumfries and Galloway, resources are being rationed and smaller schools are being disadvantaged, often having a learning assistant for a fraction of the week. I hope that the cabinet secretary, as a former teacher, will understand the pressure that it creates when support is not there for a young person at the time when they need it, which can often be unpredictable.

Jenny Gilruth: The member's substantive point was about how we can ensure that Government money, which has been protected by the Government centrally, is used at the local level to deliver on what we expect.

Some of that work is being undertaken through our relationship with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and the education and childcare assurance board to ensure that ASN funding gets to classrooms and to those who need it most.

The Parliament has committed the Government to leading a review on additional support needs. Colleagues from the member's party were at a round table with me two weeks ago to agree some of the parameters of what that review will look at. I am keen to look at how we can ensure that funding that is protected in the Government's budget makes its way into the classrooms, where it can make the biggest difference.

My final point relates to school funding. The member might be aware of an appointment that I announced at the start of the term in relation to school governance, school funding and what comes next, in terms of the Scottish attainment challenge and the pupil equity fund. John Wilson, who was formerly a headteacher in Edinburgh, has been appointed to lead hugely important work on those things. We will look at all those matters in the round. I encourage the member to engage with John Wilson as part of his independent review of how we fund our schools, because there is an opportunity through that work to answer some of the challenges that the member quite rightly raised today.

Schools (Residential Outdoor Education) (Scotland) Bill

5. **Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what discussions it has had with outdoor education centres and schools regarding the financial and staffing implications of the Schools (Residential Outdoor Education) (Scotland) Bill. (S6O-04958)

The Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise (Natalie Don-Innes): The Scottish Government has engaged with stakeholders on our outstanding concerns about the bill, which relate to affordability, equity for pupils with additional support needs and the workforce.

I met the Association of Heads of Outdoor Education Centres on 25 February, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities on 6 August and trade unions on 25 August. Since the introduction of the bill, officials have also engaged the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland and the national complex needs network. I will confirm to Parliament the Government's position on the financial resolution for the bill by 26 September.

Martin Whitfield: I am grateful to the minister for that response and for the meetings that were held in February and August, but Government is about choice and the Parliament is the people's voice of account. Government's use of process instead of choice is disappointing. What explanation can the minister give as to why process was chosen instead of debating a motion on the financial memorandum, given that meetings were held in February and August and that all the outreach that she has just spoken of could have fed into such a debate?

Natalie Don-Innes: The question by Mr Whitfield presupposes the outcome of a Government decision on the financial resolution. I remind Parliament that, as I confirmed during the members' business debate and in committee sessions last week, the financial resolution process is a legitimate and important process that ensures that ministers can exercise our unique responsibility and accountability for appropriate management of the Scottish budget. The process is not unique to the Scottish Government; the Welsh Government, the United Kingdom Government and Northern Ireland Administrations have similar processes.

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I am very much looking forward to meeting the cabinet secretary and the minister later this afternoon to discuss the bill. In relation to discussions with the outdoor education sector, what information has the Scottish Government received about my proposals for ways to reduce the cost of the bill?

Natalie Don-Innes: I have said before that I might not have discussed those exact proposals with the outdoor education sector due to the timing of the meetings. However, I have confirmed to Liz Smith that the proposals that she has made to reduce some of the implications of the bill around affordability and readiness are very welcome and are helping to inform the decision on the financial resolution.

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): Will the minister outline how the Scottish Government is supporting the delivery of outdoor learning in schools across Scotland?

Natalie Don-Innes: The bill has provided a good opportunity to discuss and highlight the amount of outdoor education that is already happening in Scotland. Outdoor education is an area of Government focus in our 2023 to 2030 learning for sustainability action plan and in reform through the curriculum improvement cycle. We continue to support investment in outdoor learning through the Scottish attainment challenge, pupil equity funding and phase 3 of our learning estate investment programme.

Nursery Mothballing (Guidance)

6. Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on its on-going review of the guidance on the mothballing of nurseries. (S6O-04959)

The Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise (Natalie Don-Innes): Scottish ministers have committed to updating the advice to local authorities on mothballing that is contained in the statutory guidance for the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010. Scottish Government officials continue to engage with local authorities, parent representatives and other stakeholders as part of that work, and we aim to provide an update to Parliament as soon as possible during the autumn term. While the review is under way, the existing guidance on mothballing remains in place. Decisions relating to the learning estate, including nurseries, are the responsibility of local authorities.

Rachael Hamilton: I am pleased to hear that there will be an update this term. However, I believe that, under the guidance from the Scottish National Party Government, nurseries in rural areas are under threat. Parents in the Scottish Borders have legitimate concerns about the mothballing process and the Government's guidance on it. Does the minister agree that, to address those concerns, any proposals right now to mothball nurseries must be paused until the Government has published the guidance? It seems apparent, if the written answers are anything to go by, that the review on mothballing will find that it is entirely inappropriate action for local authorities to take.

Natalie Don-Innes: As I said, local decisions are for local authorities. However, any decisions that impact on nursery provision should be made in consultation with local communities and affected parents and families. I have been clear that the mothballing guidance remains in place. We will provide an update on the review in the autumn,

which will take the appropriate steps to help to make the process clearer and more effective for parents.

We need to remember that mothballing is an important process for local authorities to manage their learning estate, so a balance has to be struck. I am happy to provide an update to Parliament in the autumn on the review of the guidance, as I have stated.

Construction Sector (Training and Apprenticeships)

8. Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on any steps it is taking to expand the availability of training and apprenticeships in the construction sector, in light of reported industry concerns about a growing skills gap. (S6O-04961)

The Minister for Higher and Further Education; and Minister for Veterans (Graeme Dey): The Scottish Government is committed to addressing skills gaps in the construction sector. As the member may know, we are introducing a new Government-led approach to skills planning to better meet the needs of individuals, employers and the economy. Additionally, the Scottish Funding Council is leading a short-life stakeholder group to better understand industry needs and identify areas for action. In parallel, a working group of the ministerially chaired Construction Leadership Forum is exploring measures to support the sector. Those efforts are part of a broader commitment to creating a more responsive and effective system of workforce development in construction.

Meghan Gallacher: The minister will be aware that we are in a housing emergency. We have a shortage of homes, and we need the skills to build those homes throughout the country. The minister referred to the Scottish Government's skills investment plan for construction, yet the warning signs about an ageing workforce, declining numbers in key trades and the urgent need to attract young people through schools and apprenticeships were there years ago. How does the minister plan to speed up the process of trying to get young people into the construction industry, making it a viable workforce and an area where young people feel confident that their jobs will be there for life?

Graeme Dey: The short-life working group that I referred to resulted from a round-table meeting that I convened recently involving the Construction Industry Training Board, colleges, the SFC, the Scottish Qualifications Authority, Skills Development Scotland and the career services collaborative to explore how we can deliver short, medium and long-term solutions to the issue.

I very much welcome the measured and constructive approach by the Federation of Master Builders and the Chartered Institute of Building, especially their recognition that, in order to resolve the challenges that Meghan Gallacher highlights, they need to work more closely with the Government and training providers. I advise members that my officials have invited the FMB on to the short-life working group, because the FMB clearly wants to find solutions of the type that Meghan Gallacher alludes to.

As I have said previously, this is not only about trying to deal with the immediate term, when Brexit, among other things, has had a detrimental impact on workforce availability; it is about the medium to longer term. Front and centre of that is unpacking a situation in which thousands of young people each year enter and, in large numbers, pass construction courses of varying types in our colleges, but only about 15 per cent go on to work in the sector. We need to get to the bottom of that. I hope that that gives Meghan Gallacher a degree of reassurance about how seriously we should treat that.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: A number of members want to ask supplementary questions. I doubt that I will get through all of them, but I will do my best.

Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): I have supported the construction skills demonstrations delivered by the Scottish Traditional Building Forum since 2013, and I welcome the construction pathway, including the delivery of a national 5 creative industries pilot at Wester Hailes high school. The nat 5 created parity with academic qualifications, so I welcome that it has been expanded in this academic year to include Currie community high school.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Ask a question.

Gordon MacDonald: Would the minister consider meeting the Scottish Traditional Building Forum to discuss a long-term and sustainable model for delivery to help young people across Scotland to benefit from that opportunity?

Graeme Dey: Yes.

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): In June, I hosted a parliamentary reception for the National Federation of Roofing Contractors, which was well supported by MSPs from across the chamber. Speakers at the event highlighted the personal challenges for apprentices in getting to college for training purposes, which I have raised with the minister previously. In my South Scotland region, some apprentices are forced to complete a four-hour daily commute to undertake college-based training. Does the minister think that that is acceptable and equitable, and what can be done about it?

Graeme Dey: I am well aware of the instance that Carol Mochan refers to. From my conversations with the Construction Industry Training Board, which has been very receptive on the issue, there is a recognition that we need to get smaller employers to come together to assure individual training providers—whether they are colleges or the private sector—that they can provide a critical mass of students in a locality and, thereafter, a pipeline of students. If they do that, I know that colleges are willing to consider running courses in more places, but we need both of those things to come together.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): What role will construction employers have in setting the number of apprentices, especially in the light of the recommendations in the Withers review?

Graeme Dey: Employers have input—of course they do—but they do not set the number of apprenticeships.

Stephen Kerr: Why not?

Graeme Dey: That would be entirely inappropriate, but they can have input to it. However, just for Stephen Kerr's understanding, 25.6 per cent of the apprentices that were allocated in Scotland in 2024-25 went to the construction and related occupational grouping, so a large number of apprentices are already allocated there.

I do not doubt for one moment that, if we were to increase that number, which we may well do in future, Stephen Kerr would be back in the chamber, if he is re-elected, calling for more apprentices in other sectors. The numbers point to the fact that we very much recognise the importance of construction.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: With apologies to members whom I was not able to call, that concludes portfolio question time. To allow the members on the front benches to change, there will be a brief pause before we move to the next item of business.

The full *Official Report* of today's meeting will be published online within three hours of the close of business today.

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