



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

DRAFT

Meeting of the Parliament

Tuesday 23 September 2025

Business until 14:19.

Session 6



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Tuesday 23 September 2025

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Scottish Parliament

Tuesday 23 September 2025

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

Time for Reflection

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Good afternoon. The first item of business is time for reflection, and our time for reflection leader today is Paul Rand of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Paul Rand (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints): Good afternoon. It is an honour to be invited to give this time for reflection.

I have three children and all of them, at various points, can be guilty of doom scrolling, which is the habit of scrolling through videos or other social media on their phones for inordinate amounts of time. I would love to say that I am completely innocent of the habit, but I sometimes find myself getting sucked in and losing time to my screen.

I am a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. One of the prominent leaders of the church, Dallin H Oaks, said:

"The number of good things we can do far exceeds the time available to accomplish them. Some things are better than good, and these are the things that should command priority attention in our lives. As we consider various choices, we should remember that it is not enough that something is good. Other choices are better, and still others are best."

So it is with our time. I have a busy life; I am a husband and father, and I have a full-time job and a time-consuming leadership role as a local church leader. There are not many days when there is not a meal to be made, a lift to be given, a student to speak to or a meeting to attend. I am constantly juggling and negotiating that struggle with what are the good, better and best uses of my time.

However, in among that wrestling with calendars and syncing up schedules, I find that I need to start off my day in a quiet contemplative way, spending some time to study things of my faith that are of the most importance to me. That helps to centre me. It does not always guarantee that my day does not get crazy after that, but it starts me off in the right way.

I am aware that many of you will have busy lives. You will have meetings and commitments that take up large chunks of your time. If I may give you an invitation, it would be to consider how you use your time and determine what are the good, better and best uses of it. Whatever your

belief, give yourself regular time to quietly contemplate, serve others and spend quality time with the people you love. Thank you.

Point of Order

14:02

Jamie Hepburn (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I promise not to detain colleagues for too long; I know that we will be busy this evening.

Thank you, Presiding Officer, for allowing me to make this point of order. As you are aware, we spoke yesterday and you said that it would be okay for me to do so.

I rise to refer to my conduct last week, which precipitated my standing down from ministerial office. I have apologised directly to Mr Ross. I reiterate that apology now. I have apologised to the First Minister and, yesterday, I apologised to you, Presiding Officer.

I think that it is appropriate, though, that I also apologise to the chamber and to all colleagues. To those of us who love this institution, it is important that we all act in a manner that does not bring it into disrepute. I regret that lapse in my normal conduct last week—I hope that people would recognise that I would not normally conduct myself in such a fashion—and I apologise to all colleagues.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Thank you, Mr Hepburn. I note your remarks. Members know the responsibilities that are placed on all of us, and I expect all members to take those obligations under the code of conduct seriously, both within and outwith the chamber.

Business Motion

14:04

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-19021, in the name of Graeme Dey, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on changes to the business programme.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees to the following revisions to the programme of business for—

(a) Tuesday 23 September 2025—

after

followed by Topical Questions (if selected)

insert

followed by Appointment of Junior Scottish Minister

delete

10.00 pm Decision Time

and insert

9.00 pm Decision Time

(b) Wednesday 24 September 2025—

after

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions:
Deputy First Minister Responsibilities,
Economy and Gaelic;
Finance and Local Government

insert

followed by Ministerial Statement: Improving
Provision and Access to Residential
Outdoor Education for Children and
Young People in Scotland

delete

followed by Scottish Government Debate: Improving
Literacy in Scotland's Schools

delete

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

and insert

8.00 pm Decision Time

(c) Thursday 25 September 2025—

after

followed by Financial Resolution: Tertiary Education
and Training (Funding and Governance)
(Scotland) Bill

insert

followed by Appointment of Commissioners to the
Scottish Fiscal Commission.—[*Graeme Dey*]

Motion agreed to.

Topical Question Time

14:04

Charities (Closures)

1. Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife)

(Con): To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to reports that more than 1,000 Scottish charities are closing every year. (S6T-02674)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): The third sector plays a vital role in supporting communities across Scotland, and we recognise the pressures that it is facing. We are committed to fairer funding and we have launched a multiyear funding pilot that is worth £130 million over 2025-27, which builds on areas where multiyear funding was already established.

All arms of Government have a responsibility to ensure the sustainability of the sector. We continue to work constructively within the Scottish Government with the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations, and we will carefully consider its proposals. We also continue to press the United Kingdom Government to reconsider its decision to increase employer national insurance contributions for the third sector and for recompense following those changes.

Alexander Stewart: State funding has gone down by 5 per cent since 2021, at a cost of about £177 million. The rise in employer national insurance contributions has cost the sector £78 million. At a time when demand for support from the voluntary sector is rising, it is unsustainable to expect the voluntary sector to fund the shortfall.

Taking this essential sector for granted will be devastating for families and communities across Scotland. Will the Government commit to providing the funding that is necessary to support those charities, which are lifelines for families and communities across the whole of Scotland?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I agree with some of Alexander Stewart's points about the important work that the third sector does across Scotland, and in all our communities, on a variety of issues.

I held a round-table meeting with third sector representatives during the summer so that we could talk about the challenges that they face—in the short, medium and long term—and work together to devise solutions. Some of those solutions will be in the gift of the Scottish Government and others will lie elsewhere, but, as I said at that round table, I am committed to working with the SCVO and others from the third sector to find a way through their challenges.

Alexander Stewart is quite right to point out that, for many in the third sector, demand for their services is increasing. That points to the important role that they play, and that is exactly why the Scottish Government is determined to work with them to ensure that we can support the third sector in everything that it does.

Alexander Stewart: A joint letter from 240 charities, including the Scottish Huntington's Association, not only highlights why there are so many alarming closures but sets out some solutions—an immediate cash injection, a medium-term recovery plan and a commitment for multiyear funding, with uplifts that reflect inflation.

Will the cabinet secretary commit to implementing those measures? Does she accept that those organisations will otherwise face an uncertain future?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The exact reason why I have had the many discussions that I have had—most recently the round-table discussion that I mentioned—is so that we can talk about what the Government could do.

Alexander Stewart is also well aware—because we met, I think, just last week—of the importance of the work that I undertake on behalf of the Government on child poverty as well as on the third sector. I discussed with him the importance of the process that we are about to embark on for our next Scottish Government budget.

He makes a number of requests for the Scottish Government to deliver higher funding for the third sector. I look forward to working with him when he brings forward costed proposals for, I presume, not just my portfolio but other portfolios, given that the third sector covers every part of Government and, therefore, every portfolio. When I receive a costed proposal, which I am sure will arrive on my desk during the budgetary discussions, I look forward to getting into that detail with him.

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): Is not the real story here the increase in national insurance contributions for employers? As an example—I declare an interest as a member of the Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals—that increase will cost the Scottish SPCA £400,000 extra every year. Is that not the real story of why charities are in such difficulties?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Christine Grahame is absolutely right to point out the challenge that third sector organisations faced when they were, quite frankly, blindsided by the UK Government. Only a matter of days after many third sector organisations were invited to Downing Street to discuss a covenant and an agreement with the third sector, they found out about the increase in employer national insurance contributions. My

understanding is that the impact of that on the third sector in Scotland will be around £75 million. The Scottish SPCA, which Christine Grahame mentioned, is part of that—it is also suffering from those challenges.

That is exactly why I said in my first answer that we in the Scottish Government will do what we can and work with the third sector. That other arm of Government must do the same and must respond to the criticism that it has quite rightly received for the very difficult circumstances in which it has placed the third sector.

Commission on School Reform (Recommendation)

2. Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to the recommendation made by the commission on school reform report, “Behaviour in Schools”, that teachers should be able to suspend or exclude pupils who exhibit persistent behaviour issues. (S6T-02680)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): We all want our schools to be safe places for children and young people to learn in and for our staff to work in. Our national guidance on preventing and managing exclusions and our recent guidance on consequences are clear that exclusion is an option that is open to schools where that is appropriate. Exclusion should be the last resort and, when used, it should be as a proportionate response where there is no appropriate alternative.

Exclusion alone is unlikely to lead to behavioural change, and therefore the space provided by exclusions should be used to develop a plan to provide appropriate support to address the child's behaviour.

Willie Rennie: I agree with much of that. It must be clear that schools have the right to exclude or suspend pupils, but councils also have a responsibility to provide support and education for pupils when they are out of school. The big question is whether the minister is confident that that is actually happening in local authorities and schools.

Jenny Gilruth: The member is absolutely correct that schools and teachers in particular have the right and the power to exclude or suspend children and young people because of behaviour. We have been working closely with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities on our national action plan on behaviour and relationships. That plan is jointly owned by the Scottish Government and local government, which is imperative because, as the plan sets out, local government holds the statutory responsibility for the delivery of education. I have been really clear

in my engagement with local government on that. Further, earlier this year, Councillor Tony Buchanan and I wrote to all directors of education to ensure that the action plan is making a difference at the chalk face. The points that Mr Rennie has rightly raised this afternoon are being addressed by local government.

Willie Rennie: The commission on school reform is heavily critical of the guidance that the minister has just referred to. The commission's report states that the guidance

“has not reassured teachers”,

that it

“has provoked widespread public criticism”,

and that it is

“fundamentally misguided.”

The cabinet secretary often seeks the advice of the commission on school reform, so will she take its advice today and issue new national guidance that clearly asserts the right of every young person to an education that is not disrupted by others and that recognises that dealing effectively and quickly with bad behaviour requires sanctions?

Jenny Gilruth: I often engage with the commission on school reform and I listen to it intently, and I am more than happy to give a commitment today that I will continue to do that on this issue.

I remind Mr Rennie that the guidance did not come from me as cabinet secretary or from officials; it came from the teaching profession. It was an ask from the teaching profession on the back of the behaviour in Scottish schools research, and we responded to that ask with very clear national guidance. The bodies that were involved in the commissioning of the published guidance were the Educational Institute of Scotland, the NASUWT, School Leaders Scotland, educational psychologists and local authorities. I ask Mr Rennie to reflect on the fact that the guidance has come from the profession and has been written by the experts in our classrooms.

I am, of course, more than happy to listen to the commission on a range of educational issues. Its report, which is relatively short—I think that it is seven or eight pages in length—cites a number of things. For example, it talks about support for teachers not being as strong as it has been in the past. That is an international trend that we have seen across Europe and the world post-pandemic, whereby the role of the teaching profession has diminished somewhat. It is really important that we work with our teaching trade unions and others, including the commission, on how we can help to restore the relationship between school and home. The report goes on to talk about some of the

challenge in that regard. I give a commitment to Mr Rennie that I will engage with the commission on the substantive points in its report.

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): The behaviour of children and young people does not become unacceptable overnight. Does the cabinet secretary agree that factors such as wider societal impacts, poverty and deprivation do not help when it comes to behaviour in the classroom and that they can create many of the challenges? Will the cabinet secretary provide further details of the continued work to narrow the poverty-related attainment gap and how that contributes to pupils having a more positive classroom experience?

Jenny Gilruth: I note that the report, quite rightly, makes a number of references to the pandemic and its impact on behaviour and relationships, but the impact of poverty seems to be omitted. Austerity has harmed the outcomes of some of Scotland's most vulnerable families, including children.

Previously, I have spoken about the normalisation of food banks and clothing banks in our schools. Our teachers are stepping up to meet what is now a societal need, but they should not have to do so. That is one of the reasons why I have commissioned independent advice on school funding, which is being led by John Wilson, a very experienced former headteacher. He will look at, for example, what comes next after the Scottish attainment challenge and the pupil equity fund. I encourage all members to engage with Mr Wilson's review and to contribute their ideas accordingly.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): Let me take a different tack with the cabinet secretary. Will she now accept the report's call to reassert parental responsibility, as set out in the Education (Scotland) Act 1980, so that schools are not left to carry the burden alone and parents are made to feel accountable for supporting discipline and their children's regular attendance?

Jenny Gilruth: Mr Kerr and I have debated that issue on many occasions. He talked about parental responsibility and accountability, which he is quite right to do, and his points are not at odds with our national guidance. It is not only mums and dads who have a role to play. I spent the weekend with my five-year-old niece, and aunties, uncles and the extended family also have a role in the teaching of behaviours.

One of the other points that the report makes is that it cannot always be about only the school. We need wider consideration of support for the behaviours that we think are appropriate in our schools. The reassertion of parental responsibility is not necessarily at odds with the current national

guidance, but I am happy to engage with Mr Kerr on the substantive point that he has made today.

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): Care-experienced pupils are six times more likely to be excluded than others, and that does not count informal exclusions that are due to part-time timetabling. How does that reconcile with the stated aims of the cabinet secretary's behaviour plan for a calm and consistent education, and what specific interventions will she implement to ensure that care-experienced young people have access to the education that they deserve?

Jenny Gilruth: I am conscious that there is a read-across between my responsibilities as cabinet secretary and my being recused from the Promise because my wife sits on the oversight board, which engages with the issue of support for care-experienced young people. I will ask the Minister for Children, Young People and the Promise, if she is content to answer the substantive point, to write directly to Pam Duncan-Glancy.

More broadly, we know from the chief inspector of education's school reports that there is an increasing reliance on a differentiated approach to timetabling. That might be in place for lots of good reasons, but it is important that the educational needs of all children and young people, including those who are care experienced, are met.

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): The cabinet secretary has stated that the findings come from the profession. I agree, and one of the most concerning aspects of the findings is that—this is what teachers say—the current national guidance “disempowers teachers”.

Does the cabinet secretary accept that and does she accept that there is an association between falling standards, poor attendance and poor behaviour? Does she think that the plans that the Scottish Government has set out will turn the situation around?

Jenny Gilruth: I accept that, in education, there will always be a range of different views on what the Government undertakes. To give the member an alternative view, the NASUWT said that the guidance

“has the potential to support positive improvement in managing pupil behaviour in schools.”

Mike Corbett of the NASUWT said:

“We have been actively engaged in working with the government to produce this guidance and its publication is an important step forward in our continued focus on driving down levels of disruption”.

As a Government, we have to work in partnership with our teaching trade unions. I accept that there is a range of views on the issue, but the teaching unions have broadly welcomed the guidance. To

go to the point that Mike Corbett has consistently raised with me, it is now imperative that the guidance informs better practice in our schools. I will continue to work with COSLA to that end.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):
That concludes topical question time.

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

Members who wish to suggest changes to this draft transcript should email them to official.report@parliament.scot or phone the official report on 0131 348 5447.



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba