



**OFFICIAL REPORT**  
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**DRAFT**

# Meeting of the Parliament

**Thursday 25 September 2025**

Business until 12:48.

**Session 6**



The Scottish Parliament  
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba



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**Thursday 25 September 2025**

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# Scottish Parliament

Thursday 25 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.

### Homelessness

**1. Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to the latest homelessness in Scotland statistics. (S6O-04978)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Housing (Màiri McAllan):** The statistics demonstrate the scale of the challenge that we face to reduce homelessness. Earlier this month, I delivered my housing emergency action plan, which sets out the direct and immediate measures that we will be taking to prevent homelessness, deliver more affordable homes and make better use of existing stock. That includes up to £4.9 billion of investment over the next four years, to deliver around 36,000 affordable homes; doubling our acquisition funding this year to £80 million, allowing councils to act now to acquire family-sized homes and get children out of temporary accommodation; and a £4 million investment in the expansion of the housing first approach.

This week, we have been considering stage 3 of the Housing (Scotland) Bill, which, if passed, will create a gold standard anti-homelessness law in the form of the ask and act duty.

**Roz McCall:** I am glad to hear that the cabinet secretary agrees that there is a problem. There are currently 10,000 children in temporary accommodation, some of whom are spending years in limbo, and the figure is stagnant. We also recently found out from a report in *The Herald* that there have been “nearly 40,000 violations” of homelessness regulations by Scottish local authorities in the past eight years, with the number almost doubling in the past year alone.

We have a housing emergency; there is a homelessness crisis; and nothing seems to be changing. When does the cabinet secretary believe that the money and the policies that she continually champions will finally improve the situation for the people of Scotland?

**Màiri McAllan:** I will never claim that the statistics that came out last week are anything other than stark, and they require urgent action. In

recent years, we have been dealing with a perfect storm of difficulties, with the prevailing economic situation being stagnant or on a downward trajectory and household finances being put under severe pressure from inflation, the cost of living, the pandemic, Brexit and so on. That has meant that, despite Scotland having some of the most protective anti-homelessness laws in any country, we are in a difficult situation.

That is why the housing emergency plan that I set out takes action across three pillars: ending the practice of children living in unsuitable accommodation; supporting the housing needs of vulnerable communities; and building our future by investing in new and affordable homes. I hope that that, combined with the actions that we have been taking since May last year, will quickly make a difference.

However, much of the situation—not least the social security aspect—is outwith our control, and I take this opportunity to urge the United Kingdom Government to reverse the bedroom tax, for example.

**Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Ind):** As we have just heard, it has been reported that more than 16,000 housing violations have happened in the past year alone. Will the cabinet secretary acknowledge that report, which calls its housing emergency declaration a sham, given that breaches of the legal duty to provide for homeless people, including children and pregnant women, have doubled in only one year?

**Màiri McAllan:** No, I would not agree with that characterisation. Breaches of statutory obligations by councils are not acceptable. That is exactly why I am working with local authorities—and, in particular, with the top five with the most strained homelessness services—to drive action now.

We drive action with the acquisition fund that the Government has been providing for several years and which, in my statement on 2 September, I doubled to £80 million. That fund is about asking councils to go now, acquire family homes that are on the market and use them to get children out of temporary accommodation. Another instruction that was part of that plan was to ask councils to adopt the guidance from the Association of Local Authority Chief Housing Officers on flipping temporary accommodation—that is, to contact people living in temporary accommodation that is otherwise suitable, except for the fact that it is temporary, and to discuss with the household whether it can be flipped to become their permanent accommodation.

Such measures are about taking action, and they are all backed up by investment over the next four years.

**The Presiding Officer:** Question 2 has been withdrawn.

### **Free Personal Care (Delivery)**

**3. Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government how many free personal care hours were assessed by local authorities to be needed, but were subsequently not delivered, in 2024-25. (S6O-04980)

**The Minister for Social Care and Mental Wellbeing (Tom Arthur):** The information that the member has requested for 2024-25 has not yet been published. However, the data that focuses on the uptake of free personal nursing care in previous years is available on the Scottish Government website, which provides published statistics. The 2024-25 data has a release date of November 2025.

The Scottish Government recognises that the cost of care can be high for people who are self-funding their residential care. That is why we have increased the rates paid for free personal and nursing care by 29.5 per cent since April 2020, providing an additional investment of £40 million over the past three years.

**Jamie Halcro Johnston:** I thank the minister for his answer, but I would welcome a little more detail in future.

Local councils assess the need for, and deliver, free personal care, but it was legislated for by this Parliament. The Scottish National Party's website hails the policy as one of the landmark achievements of devolution, but too many old and vulnerable people across my Highlands and Islands region are being left waiting for months, if not years, for the support that they have been assessed as needing. Some are left languishing in already-crowded hospitals, because there is no care support available to get them home or no place available in one of our pressured care homes.

Does the minister accept the seriousness of the situation across the Highlands and Islands and across Scotland? Without repeating the usual excuses, what does he say to those who are waiting for care support that they have been assessed as needing but have been left waiting to receive it?

**Tom Arthur:** I make it clear that I do not want to see anyone waiting unduly for care that they have been assessed as requiring. We are working constructively and collaboratively with our partners across local government. That work is, intentionally, being led by the cabinet secretary, with support from me, and we will continue to do that work.

We have put significant additional investment of £21.7 billion into health and social care this year, which includes £2.2 billion for social care. Those figures exceeded our original commitment, and we will continue engaging constructively with our partners to drive forward improvements.

**Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP):** Has the Labour Government's increase in employer national insurance contributions had an impact on the delivery of free personal care?

**Tom Arthur:** Regrettably, it has. Since the start of the year, the sector has been making clear the costs that will be incurred as a consequence of the United Kingdom Government's decision to increase employer national insurance contributions. The move will have a material impact, and we estimate that it will cost the sector more than £80 million this year.

It is, of course, further compounded by the UK Labour Government's decision to restrict international visas for care workers. The decision has been roundly condemned by those operating in the sector, and I urge the UK Government to reverse its course.

### **Ophthalmology (NHS Orkney)**

**4. Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD):** To ask the Scottish Government what discussions it has had with NHS Orkney regarding reported delays in ophthalmology appointments for patients. (S6O-04981)

**The Minister for Public Health and Women's Health (Jenni Minto):** During a visit to the Balfour hospital on 15 July, the cabinet secretary met with NHS Orkney's senior team to discuss its operational improvement plan and the progress being made following our additional investment of almost £73,000 for ophthalmology. That money was allocated to NHS Orkney to ensure that no patient waits longer than 52 weeks for a new out-patient appointment or for an in-patient day case admission by 31 March 2026.

Additionally, the Scottish Government commissioned the national centre for sustainable delivery and officials to meet regularly with the health board. This year, NHS Orkney has had a clinical services review and a clinically led ophthalmology peer review, which have made recommendations on the delivery of sustainable services for patients.

**Liam McArthur:** I am sure that the cabinet secretary was made aware, during his meeting at the Balfour, of the significant backlogs in ophthalmology appointments in Orkney. I have been contacted by constituents who are reporting waits for treatment of up to or exceeding three years.

I know from my discussions with NHS Orkney that it is trying to take steps to reduce those backlogs. However, given that some patients face permanent sight loss while waiting for treatment, will the Scottish Government commit to providing additional support in the short term to help tackle those unacceptable waits?

**Jenni Minto:** Those exact topics were discussed with the cabinet secretary when he visited Orkney in July. I am happy to consider the proposal that Mr McArthur makes. I know that NHS Orkney has had access to the global citizen post for ophthalmology, which it shares with NHS Highland and NHS Western Isles, but that post is currently unfilled.

NHS Orkney and NHS Highland have been working together on looking at how additional capacity can be delivered, but I absolutely recognise the concerns that have been raised. In other areas of healthcare, we are able to work across boundaries, and I hope that something similar can be worked out in this case.

### Asylum Accommodation (Protests)

**5. Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on any discussions that it has had with Police Scotland about the policing of protests outside hotels and other accommodation for people seeking asylum. (S6O-04982)

**The Minister for Victims and Community Safety (Siobhian Brown):** Scottish ministers have regular discussions with Police Scotland on a range of issues including the policing of protests. Operational policing is a matter for Police Scotland, and it has confirmed that it has the appropriate resources to ensure the safety of those who are in attendance and to mitigate disruption to the wider community. Police Scotland is a rights-based organisation and it is committed to facilitating peaceful protests and counter-demonstrations to allow those who are seeking to protest to exercise their human rights. However, let me be clear: there is no place for criminality or hate crime on our streets, and I fully support Police Scotland taking the appropriate and proportionate action in response to such behaviour.

**Maggie Chapman:** In the north-east, we have seen anti-immigration protests in Peterhead, Westhill, Aberdeen and Dundee. The Stobswell forum in Dundee issued a statement highlighting the fear and alarm that were caused by these so-called protesters following their actions in a public park. The same protesters marched in an unorganised way over the A90 Kingsway and held an intimidating and hate-filled protest outside the homes of asylum seekers. They spread false anti-immigration information online, causing fear and

alarm among parents of young children, and they hurled stones and other missiles at anti-fascists.

What proactive action is being taken to respond to the far-right influence on these protests and the intimidation that they cause to residents and local communities?

**Siobhian Brown:** I am deeply concerned about some of the rhetoric that we are seeing across the United Kingdom, which should have no place in our society. It is therefore vital that factual information is also placed in the public domain. As elected members across the UK—as democratically elected representatives with a platform—we have a duty and a responsibility to ensure that we call out any dangerous misinformation, and certainly that we do not perpetrate it.

In a democracy, people have the right of peaceful protest, but the protests outside the hotels go far beyond what is acceptable in our country, which has historically had a humane approach, and one that we should be proud of, to those fleeing conflict and persecution. The protests are creating a sense of real fear and alarm for those who have already gone through so much.

In saying that, it is important that we engage with the people who are protesting in order to hear their concerns and understand the reasons that are driving them to protest. I know that Police Scotland continues to engage with protesters through liaison officers, and the Scottish Government has funded the Centre for Good Relations to work with those who are protesting to hear their concerns.

**Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland) (Lab):** We have brought in legislation to create boundaries—buffer zones—around clinics to prevent people who are accessing services from being harassed. What consideration has the Government given to establishing some kind of boundaries around residential dwellings to prevent people from being harassed in their homes?

**Siobhian Brown:** The right to free speech and protest is at the heart of a healthy democracy and the Scottish Government is committed to upholding that right, but it understands the distress that the protests are causing to residents across asylum accommodation. Creating buffer zones similar to those that have been introduced in relation to abortion clinics would require new legislation. We have no current plans to do that, but we will continue to monitor the situation.

### General Practice Service Capacity (NHS Grampian)

**6. Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will

provide an update on the steps that it is taking to increase service capacity in GP practices within NHS Grampian. (S6O-04983)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray):** In August, I announced initial additional investment of £15 million in general practice. GP practices in Grampian will receive £1.5 million of that funding, which builds on the increased investment of more than £100 million that we have already made in general practice over the past two years.

We have been listening carefully to the views of GPs, and the new investment will help to ease financial pressures, support workforce retention and recruitment, build service capacity and support the day-to-day running of GP services in Grampian and across Scotland.

We remain in discussions with the sector on the provision of further support in the future, but the initial instalment demonstrates the Government's commitment to making it easier for people to see their GP and to ensuring that more NHS funding goes into primary and community care.

**Jackie Dunbar:** The cabinet secretary will be aware of the recent pressures that NHS Grampian has been facing, and I know that he will join me in thanking all of the NHS staff in Grampian who have been working hard to manage those pressures. Can he provide a further update on how the Scottish Government is supporting NHS Grampian to relieve its pressures and ensure that patients are receiving the care that they need in a timely fashion?

**Neil Gray:** I am aware of the pressures, and I echo the member's thanks to staff in NHS Grampian for their commitment, their hard work and their dedication to providing the best care possible.

There are people still waiting too long in Grampian and elsewhere, and that is not good enough. Our budget provides a record £21.7 billion for health and social care, with more than £100 million to tackle the longest waits. NHS Grampian is receiving more than £9 million to support specialties that have the longest wait times, and we have established an assurance board to agree an improvement plan.

Grampian has also welcomed a new chief executive this week, and we will ensure that the board has support to deliver the plan and address any further opportunities for improvement.

**Alexander Burnett (Aberdeenshire West) (Con):** Constituents are becoming concerned about the lack of oversight of privately contracted GP surgeries, such as the Alford Medical Group practice, which has a ratio of one GP to 6,000

patients—more than three times higher than the national average.

The company poorly delivering that NHS Grampian contract is also serving Ayrshire. Although health boards have visibility of who they contract GP services with, they do not have visibility of contracts that are held with other health boards. That makes it impossible to hold accurate data on GP-to-patient ratios, as GPs might work across different practices and in different health board areas. What steps will the cabinet secretary take to ensure full transparency on contracted medical practices across Scotland?

**Neil Gray:** Alexander Burnett understands the nature of the contractual obligations that are in place through the contract, and the obligations that are on boards to ensure that GP practices deliver on their contractual obligations.

The point that he raised about that particular practice is concerning. I am keen to be furnished with more detail from him on that, so that everything possible can be done to ensure that we have a GP to patient ratio that is commensurate with the type of service that we expect and the access to services that we expect, which has been made plain to GPs and health boards.

### Youth Employment Support (Rutherglen)

**7. Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government how it supports youth employment in the Rutherglen constituency, including through employability services. (S6O-04984)

**The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Gaelic (Kate Forbes):** Employment support for young people begins in the school setting through Skills Development Scotland's careers services and its developing the young workforce programme.

Additional support for those who have left school without a positive destination is available through devolved employability services. That support is available in every local authority area in Scotland.

**Clare Haughey:** Routes to Work South, which is based in Cambuslang, in my constituency, is an award-winning employment champion that offers packages of tailored support and training, including to many young people, and it is celebrating 20 years of operation this year.

Does the minister share my concern that if the Department for Work and Pensions' proposed closure of Cambuslang jobcentre goes ahead, a vital link between the services is at risk in a sector where partnership working is vital?



**Kate Forbes:** I absolutely understand and share the member's concern about the proposed jobcentre closure. Access to support could become more difficult if it goes ahead.

I also recognise the importance of Routes to Work South's 20 years of support in Cambuslang. It is important that there is cross-sector partnership in delivering services; collaborations through community-led initiatives, local organisations and integrated services will continue to evolve and provide vital support.

#### **Distress Brief Intervention**

**8. Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the distress brief intervention programme. (S6O-04985)

**The Minister for Social Care and Mental Wellbeing (Tom Arthur):** Since November 2024, the distress brief intervention programme has been live in all 31 health and social care partnership areas across Scotland for those aged 16 and over.

We also have three national referral pathways to DBI, via NHS 24 and call handling centres operated by both the Scottish Ambulance Service and Police Scotland. Those provide additional options for key services to refer people for DBI support.

**Emma Roddick:** I would be interested to know what data has been collected on re-presentation rates for individuals who have received DBI support, and how it compares with previous re-presentation rates for people in distress.

**Tom Arthur:** I will be happy to write to the member to provide that specific information.

**The Presiding Officer:** That concludes general questions.

## **First Minister's Question Time**

12:00

### **Innovation**

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

This is Scotland's first-ever national innovation week, with a series of events including today's national innovation summit in Edinburgh. We can all agree that innovation is critical to business growth, creating jobs and a healthy economy.

When the Scottish National Party Government launched its innovation strategy two years ago, it produced a scorecard to measure performance. The scorecard was updated this morning, and I have it here. It shows that performance is declining across more than half of the Government's own key measures. Is that really good enough?

**The First Minister (John Swinney):** The Government takes forward a range of measures to encourage innovation in our economy, because economic growth is central to the Government's policy agenda, as I have explained to the Parliament on countless occasions.

The Deputy First Minister took part in the innovation summit this morning, and I have had some recent discussions on the matter. Just last week, I met representatives of the games industry, which is a sparkling example of innovation in Scotland through which collaboration between the business sector and our universities is generating substantial economic growth for Scotland. That is just one example of how the Government takes forward its innovation agenda.

**Russell Findlay:** Let us look at the issue in a little more detail. One of the measures on the SNP's scorecard is the number of Scottish businesses that are innovating. That is measured using well-established rules from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, and it reveals a deeply worrying fact: under the SNP, Scotland is ranked behind every single region of England. In the week of Scotland's first-ever innovation summit, can John Swinney explain why Scotland is trailing behind the rest of the United Kingdom?

**The First Minister:** Recent data indicates that Scotland has the highest rate of start-ups in the United Kingdom apart from one part of England, which indicates the culture that we are creating in Scotland to encourage business growth and expansion. The collaboration between our universities and the gaming industry, to take the example that I cited in my first answer, is a clear example of how our university community

collaborates with the business community to generate economic growth.

The Government is always attentive to supporting, encouraging and nurturing innovation in Scotland, because that is the route to prosperity for our country. The Government is delivering on that agenda.

**Russell Findlay:** It is innovation week and I asked about innovation, but John Swinney starts talking about something completely unrelated. He seems to be in a state of denial. The SNP marked the scorecard itself, and that shows that it is failing.

Even when we look at one of the measures in the scorecard that the SNP claims is improving, we find that it is not much to shout about. The SNP claims that the performance of high-growth businesses is improving, but the scorecard reveals that Scotland is ranked 23rd out of 28 European countries. Under the SNP, we are behind Romania, Bulgaria and Lithuania. Within the UK, we are behind Wales and almost every English region. Is that really a record to be proud of?

**The First Minister:** Our assessment of high-growth companies has found that that activity is at its highest level since 2019. That indicates that we are making progress beyond pre-pandemic levels in Scotland.

Mr Findlay gave me a range of examples of other European countries. I simply make the point to him that those other European countries are all independent countries, with the full range of economic powers at their disposal. I am delighted that Mr Findlay has come to the Parliament today to make the economic argument for Scottish independence.

**Russell Findlay:** The independence klaxon after question 3—I had expected it after question 4.

We need innovation to grow the economy. That is how to deliver more jobs and more money for public services, but I have lost count of the number of hard-grafting Scottish businesspeople who tell me about their despair at the SNP Government's anti-business actions. They are being stifled by a torrent of regulation. The SNP has imposed more red tape on businesses in hospitality, oil and gas, house building, food and drink and more. SNP income tax rates are punishingly higher than they are elsewhere in the UK. All that means that there are fewer opportunities for aspirational Scots to get on in life. Will the First Minister accept that his Government is actively harming Scottish business innovation and putting jobs at risk?

**The First Minister:** No, I will not accept that doom-laden analysis of Scotland's position,

because the facts do not support Mr Findlay. Since 2007, when the SNP Government came to power, gross domestic product per person in Scotland has grown by 10.3 per cent, compared with growth of 6.1 per cent in the rest of the United Kingdom, while productivity has grown at an average rate of 1.1 per cent, compared with the UK average of 0.4 per cent, so growth in Scotland has been stronger compared with growth in the rest of the United Kingdom.

Mr Findlay was surprised that I picked up on his open support for Scottish independence in his question to me, but let me give him a practical example. One of the issues that businesses are wrestling with today is the increase in employer national insurance contributions, which is stifling growth in our country. That was not a decision of my Government; it was a decision of the hopeless United Kingdom Labour Government, which is damaging our economy.

I rest my case—if we had the powers in Scotland to take our own economic decisions, we would be better off through independence.

### **Accident and Emergency Departments (Waiting Times)**

**2. Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab):** In every part of the country, our national health service is in crisis. This week, the Royal College of Emergency Medicine warned that, last year, long waits in A and E departments caused more than 800 deaths that could have been prevented—that is more than 800 families grieving a loved one.

Dr Fiona Hunter of the Royal College of Emergency Medicine said:

"Behind this statistic are stories of heartbreak. Because these are people. Mums, dads, brothers, sisters, grandparents—their deaths shattering the lives of families and friends."

Why, year after year, is this happening under the Scottish National Party Government?

**The First Minister (John Swinney):** The first thing that I want to say is that, in any circumstance in which an individual loses their life while in the care of the national health service, especially if they have experienced a long wait in an accident and emergency department, I express my regret and my apology to the families of the affected individuals, because I accept that people are waiting too long in accident and emergency—whether that is for four hours, eight hours or 12 hours.

I say to Mr Sarwar that the Royal College of Emergency Medicine's contribution contains challenging information, but the Government welcomes the royal college's challenge, and we are addressing the issues that it has put to us.

It is encouraging that the latest monthly A and E figures, for July 2025, showed the lowest number of 12-hour waits for any month since September 2023. Of course, that whole period was affected by the recovery that we are having to make from the effect of the pandemic on the operation of the health service.

**Anas Sarwar:** To be clear, that is 818 apologies from the First Minister, because that is the number of excess deaths as a result of the Government's failure to properly operate our national health service. The sad fact is that, despite the heroic efforts of NHS staff, the SNP is failing patients across Scotland.

John Swinney will be aware of the case of Brooke Paterson, a 19-year-old footballer who broke her leg while playing in North Lanarkshire on Sunday. Despite the clear medical emergency, Brooke was left lying in pain on the pitch under jackets and coats for five hours until an ambulance arrived. The Scottish Ambulance Service blamed the five-hour delay on hospital turnaround times, which it said range from 90 minutes to three hours in the area. The Ambulance Service has apologised, but it is not the Ambulance Service that has broken the system. Is it not John Swinney who should be apologising to Brooke?

**The First Minister:** I apologise to Brooke Paterson. This morning, I read the story and made some investigations into the issue. I very much regret her experience. Further scrutiny will have to be done, because I have had limited time to look at what happened, but it appears to me as though an error was made in the classification of the call, which was not given the priority that it should have been given. That is not acceptable. We have to look into whether an error was made and whether steps need to be taken to remedy the situation.

The Government's efforts to resolve the challenges that sometimes affect the Ambulance Service's ability to respond, which relates to the congestion of ambulances at hospitals, require a whole-system response. We need to reduce any delays that individuals experience when leaving hospital—97 per cent of patients leave hospital without any delay to their discharge. It is also about the availability of social care and the throughput of different accident and emergency departments to ensure that the Ambulance Service is able to respond timeously.

Those issues are all at the heart of the points that were made by the Royal College of Emergency Medicine. As I said earlier, the Government is addressing those issues, which reflect the whole-system challenges that we face in the aftermath of Covid.

**Anas Sarwar:** That is 819 apologies in just a few minutes from the First Minister to people whom he has failed across the country.

Across Scotland, our NHS is on life support. In 2018, on the SNP's watch, the maternity facility in Stranraer was temporarily closed. Seven years on, it is now permanently closed, putting women at risk. The mothers whom I met are distraught. Claire Fleming said that her cousin had to travel from Stranraer to Dumfries to give birth. She ended up having to pull into a farm drive and have her baby there. Angela Armstrong, who is a retired general practitioner, added:

"My fear is that we are going to have a death".

Every part of our NHS is struggling on John Swinney's and the SNP's watch. What does John Swinney say to all those families who have lost loved ones due to long waits, to all those who have waited for hours in pain for an ambulance and to mothers in rural communities who cannot access the maternity care that they need because of his Government's incompetence?

**The First Minister:** As I have indicated since I became First Minister, I recognise that there are challenges and weaknesses in the provision of healthcare in the aftermath of the pandemic. Along with the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care, I am absolutely focused on addressing those issues.

As I indicated in my previous answer, 97 per cent of discharges from Scottish hospitals happen without delay. It is expected that there will be 213,000 extra appointments and procedures, which exceeds our commitment, as promised in our programme for government, by more than 60,000; the number of operations that were performed in July was the highest in five years, with an increase of 8.9 per cent compared with July last year; and the number of hip and knee operations reached an all-time high in 2024.

Mr Sarwar raised issues in maternity care. Some of those will be assessed following clinical advice about the sustainability of services in some rural areas in Scotland. That is a difficult issue, but the Government listens carefully to clinical advice, as the Parliament would expect it to do.

There is another issue that is difficult. Our national health service depends on the flow of staff coming from other countries to support us, and our challenge in that respect is being made extraordinarily more difficult because of the immigration policies that are being pursued by the United Kingdom Government. Those policies are absurd and are making it more difficult to deliver public services. In Scotland, 26 per cent of social care staff are people who have come from other countries to this country, and the UK Labour Government is making such movement much

more difficult. I suggest that Mr Sarwar should try to get his Labour Government in London to take a different stance on immigration; we would all be better off as a consequence.

### **Child Poverty (Council Tax Debt)**

**3. Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green):** Yesterday, the First Minister said that it is our “moral imperative” to eradicate child poverty. He is right to highlight the fact that Scotland is the only part of the United Kingdom where child poverty is decreasing. However, one in every five children here still lives in poverty—in one of the richest countries in the history of the planet. They arrive at school hungry and will sit in freezing homes this winter because their parents cannot afford their increased bills. They need the Scottish Government to do more.

Many of those children’s families are in huge amounts of debt, which often includes council tax debt. A few weeks ago, I shared with the First Minister the fact that the rules on council tax debt in Scotland are nearly four times harsher than those in England. Debts can be held and chased for up to 20 years here, as opposed to for up to six years in England. The same councils that provide free school meals to children in poverty at lunchtime are sending sheriff officers to their doors after school. Does the First Minister think that it is right to chase desperate people for debts that, often, they cannot pay, for four times as long in Scotland as would happen in England, or does he agree that it is time to change the law and wipe out those toxic, unpayable debts?

**The First Minister (John Swinney):** Mr Greer knows the absolute focus that I have on eradicating child poverty. When I became First Minister, I was asked what the clear mission of my Government was, and I said that it was the eradication of child poverty.

I lead a Government that is taking measures such as the abolition of the two-child limit, which we will abolish in March next year. The Labour Government has failed to abolish that policy in the United Kingdom, but we will do so here next March. The Scottish child payment is already in place. We are adopting a range of measures, in addition to what we are doing on housing, childcare, transport and a variety of other issues.

I have a lot of sympathy with Mr Greer’s point about long-standing council tax debt. I know that related provisions are being considered in the context of the Housing (Scotland) Bill; those proposals have not been subject to the amount of consultation that would normally apply for legislation. The Parliament rightly pressurises the Government to ensure that there is proper consultation—as do stakeholders, including our local authority partners.

Having said all that, I am sympathetic to Mr Greer’s point, and I am open to further dialogue on how we might pursue his ideas in that respect.

**Ross Greer:** The First Minister is absolutely right to list the policies that the Scottish Government is delivering here that are not available to families in the rest of the UK. The Greens were proud to work with his party to deliver a number of them. However, his mission is to eradicate child poverty, and he knows that everything that he has announced so far will not do that.

Not long ago, SallyAnn Kelly, the chief executive of Aberlour, the children’s charity, said:

“It is meaningless for ministers to prioritise child poverty and promise to help families struggling to get their heads above water while other public sector organisations are pressing them down.”

SallyAnn is right. That is why Aberlour wrote to the Government to support a Green amendment to the Housing (Scotland) Bill to bring Scotland’s time limit on council tax debts down from 20 years to five years. I hear the First Minister’s support for the principle behind that, but I point out that the Parliament is due to vote on the amendment next Tuesday. It would wipe out millions of pounds-worth of toxic, unpayable council tax debts that are trapping families in cycles of poverty and financial crisis. Will the Scottish Government support that Green proposal, wipe out that debt and give thousands of families the chance that they desperately need to escape from poverty?

**The First Minister:** Mr Greer quoting SallyAnn Kelly, the chief executive of Aberlour, provides me with a welcome opportunity to record, in the Parliament, my appreciation for her work. She has been a formidable champion for the children of Scotland and for Aberlour. *[Applause.]* I record my warmest thanks and my good wishes to her on her impending retirement from that role, and I am grateful to Mr Greer for providing me with the opportunity to do so.

As I said, I am very sympathetic to the point that Mr Greer puts to me, but we have to go through the detail to make sure that we can take such a course of action, which involves a great deal of dialogue with our local authority partners. Mr Greer will know about that because he and I spent quite a lot of time wrestling with issues of liaison with local authorities—if I can put it as delicately as that—while the Green Party was in Government with us. He knows what we have to go through. I say to him in all clarity that I am very sympathetic to his suggestion, but we have to ensure that we take all the steps to do that correctly. We will use our best intentions as we consider the bill and take any action as a consequence.

### Older People (Poverty)

**4. Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP):** To ask the First Minister what assessment the Scottish Government has made of any implications for its work to address poverty amongst older people of recent findings by the Living Wage Foundation that a majority of people on a low-income pension in the United Kingdom are unable to cover basic living costs. (S6F-04335)

**The First Minister (John Swinney):** I am concerned by those findings, which underline the hardship that older people are facing during the cost of living crisis. That is precisely why we are investing in support for low-income pensioners, including an estimated £157 million for pension-age winter heating payment and pension-age disability payment, which helps with additional costs for those who are living with a disability. Unlike in the rest of the United Kingdom, eligible low-income households, including pensioners across Scotland, are also guaranteed to receive support through our winter heating payment. Unlike the UK Government's cold weather payment, it provides a guaranteed payment every year to eligible clients, rather than relying on sustained periods of sufficiently cold weather.

**Elena Whitham:** The findings in the report should concern all of us. Labour promised no austerity and more support for pensioners, yet, in the midst of a cost of living crisis, it tried to slash winter fuel payments, attempted to cut disability payments and blocked WASPI women—women against state pension inequality—from getting compensation. All of that was during a time of rising energy bills, food prices and inflation—pressures that are hitting struggling households the hardest.

What assurances can the First Minister provide to pensioners in Scotland that the Scottish Government is squarely in their corner and recognises the immense strain that many of them are under?

**The First Minister:** The assurance that I can provide to Elena Whitham and older people in our society is that the provisions that the Government has put in place are part of the package of support that we believe is necessary for vulnerable pensioners.

I point out that, sometimes, Parliament faces a call for us to clamp down on social security expenditure—I think that I have heard that language before—but nobody ever follows it up with specific suggestions about how that expenditure should be cut. So, of course, the benefits that I refer to could be under threat from the challenges that other parties put to us. However, let me be absolutely crystal clear to

Elena Whitham that this Government stands in support of those payments and the support that we put in place, and that will remain the case in the Government's provisions.

### National Health Service (Waiting Times)

**5. Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con):** To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government's response is to reports that proposed changes to the counting method for NHS waiting lists will result in numbers falling despite no more patients being seen. (S6F-04327)

**The First Minister (John Swinney):** The change to official statistics is about ensuring that a patient's wait is reflected accurately. Public Health Scotland made that decision to align with the latest waiting times guidance, which was published in 2023. The Welsh Government announced a not dissimilar move in April of this year.

Previously, some long waits might have been recorded as such due to patient unavailability, multiple missed or cancelled appointments, or the refusal of two reasonable offers of appointments. Under the guidance, in such a scenario, the patient's waiting times clock may be reset or adjusted where clinically appropriate. That change will result in a small drop in waiting times statistics for those waiting for more than 52 weeks, but no change to the overall waiting list numbers.

Public Health Scotland has been clear that the change will support transparency and allow patients to identify a more accurate waiting time for their procedure.

**Brian Whittle:** I thank the First Minister for that answer. I have to be honest, Presiding Officer—I was ready to stand up here and quote the unofficial motto of the Scottish National Party as being, "Why solve the problem when you can move the goalposts?" However, the truth is that that would do no more to reduce waiting times than the Scottish Government's statistical tinkering will.

Meanwhile, the Royal College of Emergency Medicine is saying that more than 800 people died last year because they had to wait for more than 12 hours in accident and emergency. Despite the numbers of patients coming through the doors of A and E staying broadly the same, more people are waiting for longer to receive care.

We need to bring forward serious, substantial plans to modernise the national health service. We need policies that reduce the need, we need to seize the opportunity that tech and artificial intelligence bring, and we need to vastly improve working conditions for those who care for us.

Is the First Minister prepared to bring forward those substantial plans for us to debate? That

approach would bring constructive support from across the chamber.

**The First Minister:** I very much welcome Mr Whittle's engagement on these questions. Mr Whittle has developed a contribution to Parliament that has focused unreservedly on the importance of early intervention and on the measures to reduce demand in healthcare services. Those messages are very much part of the population health framework that the Government set out earlier this year, so I welcome Mr Whittle's engagement on that issue.

The NHS is being reformed by the steps that we are taking. As I recounted in my answer to Mr Sarwar, we are undertaking more procedures within the national health service. However, there is a need for us to concentrate much more on early intervention and on good health protection. As I said, those steps are inherent to the Government's policy programme.

There is also the need to ensure that the NHS is well funded. The Government has put in place a record funding settlement for the service to address the fact that we have an ageing population and consequently greater healthcare need. However, the budget needs to be supported in Parliament. I encourage Mr Whittle to use his influence in his party to secure support for the Government's budget this year—such support was absent last year. If Mr Whittle is interested in having a collaborative discussion to ensure that we have all-party support for investment in our NHS, the Government is willing to take forward those proposals.

**Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP):** I welcome the fact that the Scottish Government remains focused on reducing waiting times, including by promoting the preventative approach that is mentioned in the population health framework. How will the Scottish Government's targeted investment of more than £110 million this year enable patients across Scotland to access the treatment that they need more quickly?

**The First Minister:** We expect the funding to deliver 213,000 more appointments and procedures than in 2024-25, which will exceed our programme for government target of delivering 150,000 extra appointments and procedures. That greater capacity will help to address the issues affecting waiting times that Emma Harper has put to me.

Various investments will be made to deploy that expenditure to ensure that we can make developments in certain specialties, including investments in Gartnavel hospital in Glasgow, Inverclyde royal infirmary, Perth royal infirmary, Queen Margaret hospital in Dunfermline and Stracathro hospital in Tayside. Those sites will

deliver more than 2,500 additional orthopaedic and 9,500 cataract procedures, which will help us to erode the waiting list that we are experiencing.

**Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab):** As the Scottish Government fiddles with waiting list statistics and Neil Gray rolls back on promises to end the longest waits, it bears repeating that, this week, the Royal College of Emergency Medicine warned of a continuing crisis in A and E, by highlighting an estimated 818 excess and avoidable deaths in emergency departments.

The First Minister has been in government for the past 18 years. When will he get serious and wake up to the reality that patients and hard-working staff face? When will we see the end of eight-hour and 12-hour waits in Scotland's NHS?

**The First Minister:** As I indicated, in the data for July 2025 we have seen the lowest level of 12-hour waits since 2023, in the aftermath of the pandemic. That is just one illustration of the Government's focus on addressing those issues.

Jackie Baillie has railed against me for the technical changes that Public Health Scotland has decided to make, independently of the Government, to ensure that the statistics are accurate. What she did not rail against was the Welsh Labour Government's doing exactly the same thing when it looked at the issue. That just tells us what we have long known—that when Jackie Baillie comes to the Parliament to posture on the health service, she is full of hypocrisy in the stance that she takes.

## Dementia

**6. Foysoil Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab):** To ask the First Minister what urgent action the Scottish Government is taking in light of Public Health Scotland's estimate that dementia in Scotland is set to rise by more than 50 per cent by 2044. (S6F-04336)

**The First Minister (John Swinney):** I recognise the evidence that the member references. Many in the chamber will personally know an individual or a family impacted by dementia. That is why I recently held a round-table discussion in Bute house to discuss how we can better unlock innovation in supporting people with advanced dementia. That was suggested to me by Sir Iain Anderson, a distinguished Scottish businessman. I have asked the Minister for Social Care and Mental Wellbeing to take forward work on that.

We will also build on efforts that we are already undertaking to better understand what interventions can make a difference to people's dementia risk, learning from initiatives such as the Scottish Government-backed pilot of the brain health service and clinic in Aberdeen. Our 10-year

dementia strategy focuses on enhancing support in our communities, including through investing in grass-roots support, challenging the stigma that people face following a diagnosis, and improving the training and expertise of our health and social care workforce.

**Foyso Choudhury:** Public Health Scotland estimates that by 2044, as many as 53,800 more people could be living with dementia compared with in 2019. Alzheimer Scotland has rightly warned about the state of investment in dementia now, let alone in the future. Is that any wonder, given that, under this Government, integration joint boards face an estimated funding gap of £560 million this year?

Does the First Minister accept that it is time to wake up to the dementia time bomb that Scotland is facing and prioritise prevention, early intervention and support for people who are living with the disease?

**The First Minister:** Yes, I agree that those measures should be taken—they are in the population health framework and the dementia strategy and are exactly the approach that the Government is taking. There is a link between what Mr Choudhury has put to me and what Mr Whittle put to me a moment ago about the need to shift to early intervention and community support. I acknowledge the importance of the expansion of care to ensure that we deliver much more of it at home and in the community, where people want to care for their loved ones, according to their circumstances. That will be the focus of the Government's activities in this area.

We will be helped by the dialogue that has been initiated by the round-table discussion that I held in Bute house, by the considerable impetus to our thinking provided by the formulation of the dementia strategy, and by Sir Iain Anderson's intervention to support me in that activity.

**Annie Wells (Glasgow) (Con):** Dementia affects not just those who are diagnosed, but the hundreds of unpaid carers across Glasgow and Scotland who provide them with vital support. What urgent steps is the Scottish Government taking to ensure that those carers get the financial, emotional and respite support that they need as dementia cases continue to rise?

**The First Minister:** Support is available for carers in Scotland that is not available in other parts of the United Kingdom. That is because of the investment that the Government makes in our social security system.

I welcome Annie Wells's support for the social security measures that the Government is taking, and I look forward to her supporting the Government's budget as we protect those measures in the forthcoming period. Perhaps she

can also persuade the front bench of her party to stop arguing for cutting social security, because doing that would undermine the availability of the support that she wants me to ensure. The Conservatives cannot have their cake and eat it. If we want to have support for carers, we have to be prepared to vote for it in the budget.

**The Presiding Officer:** We move to constituency and general supplementary questions. If all members are concise, we will be able to involve more members.

### Journalism (Job Losses)

**Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP):** STV has this morning announced plans to cut 60 jobs, which is 10 per cent of its workforce, and regional news programming across Scotland. That follows the news that the *Daily Record* publisher, Reach plc, plans to cut more than 300 jobs.

Does the First Minister agree that local news journalism plays a more vital role than ever in our democracy? Will he outline what steps the Scottish Government is taking to protect journalism jobs?

**The First Minister (John Swinney):** I very much agree with the concern expressed by Rona Mackay, who brings her formidable experience as a journalist before she became a member of Parliament. Local journalism is absolutely important for the scrutiny of public policy at all levels in Scottish society. I was concerned to hear this morning's reports about STV and the recent news about the *Daily Record*.

This morning, the Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture, Angus Robertson, has indicated to the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee that he will engage with STV, Ofcom and the trade unions to highlight our concerns. We will give whatever assistance we can in that respect. It is absolutely vital to our democracy that we have sustained media engagement, and the Government will do all that it can to support those who are affected. This will be a very worrying time for all the affected employees. They have my understanding and my support.

**Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con):** I have a follow-up to the question about STV. It is good to hear the First Minister give his support on the issue, because one of the big consequences will be far less local news that is relevant to the north and the north-east. Does the First Minister agree that the proposed change is bad news for Scottish viewers, especially those who live in rural communities, and that it should be reconsidered as a matter of urgency?

**The First Minister:** I share Mr Lumsden's specific concern, because I understand that one of the components of the STV proposals is that the Aberdeen news programme would potentially cease broadcasting. Different issues affect different communities around the country, and I acknowledge that STV is very successful at reflecting the different issues in different parts of the country.

Mr Lumsden raises the particular issue of how different parts of the country might be affected, and I entirely agree with him on that. I will make sure that that is reflected in the representations that the cabinet secretary makes on the matter.

**Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab):** This morning's news from STV will have a significant impact on Scottish media workers, the economy, our democracy and the viewing public across Scotland. It will have a particularly serious impact on the one in 10 STV staff who face redundancy.

The proposal in relation to the Aberdeen news programme requires specific approval from Ofcom. Will the Scottish Government make specific representations to Ofcom on the future of the Aberdeen news programme?

**The First Minister:** I assure Mr Bibby that we will, but we will also make representations on a range of other issues.

Mr Lumsden and Mr Bibby have both made an important point about the need to reflect the different issues that affect different parts of the country. Those matters must be considered by Ofcom, and they will feature in the representations that Mr Robertson makes.

### **Inflation (Cost of Living Crisis)**

**Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP):** A new report by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development has forecast that the United Kingdom faces the highest level of inflation of any major economy this year. It has predicted that the annual rate of inflation will soar to 3.5 per cent by the end of the year, with higher food prices being cited as a factor.

Households across Scotland face significant pressures right now, but the Labour UK Government seems to be incapable of acting to provide any meaningful support. Does the First Minister share my concern that Labour is lost on the cost of living crisis? In the face of Westminster's economic mismanagement, what steps is his Scottish National Party Government taking to support families during the cost of living crisis?

**The First Minister (John Swinney):** The Scottish Government has taken a number of steps, in our policy programme and in our

decisions on public sector pay, in an effort to address the legitimate issues that Mr Stewart has put to me. In our public sector pay policy, we have put forward settlements that I believe are appropriate and which take into account the inflation pressures that Mr Stewart has set out.

As part of our policy programme, a range of provisions are available in Scotland, such as free prescriptions and free eye examinations, free bus travel, free tuition for university students, and early learning and childcare support that is estimated to have a value of up to £6,000 for every eligible child. In recent weeks, the Government has abolished peak rail fares, which will save a commuter from Glasgow to Edinburgh nearly 50 per cent of their costs on a daily basis. That is concrete action that the SNP Government is delivering to support people in the cost of living crisis.

### **Christies of Fochabers**

#### **Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con):**

Last week, Christies of Fochabers—a nursery that grows around 20 million trees a year—went into administration. Christies has been growing trees in Moray since 1820 and is crucial to the forestry industry across Scotland. Will the First Minister agree to meet me and those who are involved with the company at the moment to see what support the Scottish Government might be able to make available to ensure that, after seven generations of the Christies operating in Moray, they can continue to do so into the future?

**The First Minister (John Swinney):** I am very familiar with Christies, which is a long-standing business in Fochabers. Richard Lochhead, who is the local MSP, has kept me up to date with the worrying situation that is being faced there.

As Mr Ross will know, the Government has extensive tree-planting commitments as part of its climate change agenda. I was in the Moray area during the summer recess to open a very significant tree nursery that will support that activity. Despite the scale of investment in that tree facility, private sector capacity through Christies and other companies—I should not refer just to Christies—will still be needed to meet our tree-planting targets.

The issue that Mr Ross raises is significant. The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands, Mairi Gougeon, will happily engage with him on that question. The support of the Government and Highlands and Islands Enterprise in engaging with Christies, in recognition of its contribution towards the climate change activity, is merited, and I will make sure that it happens.



### Alcohol-related Deaths

#### **Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab):**

National Records of Scotland revealed this week that 1,185 people died from alcohol-related causes last year. Of those, 48 deaths occurred in parts of Ayrshire, in my South Scotland region. Although a national decline in that figure is welcome, we cannot be complacent. The number of alcohol-related deaths remains significantly higher than it was decades ago, and those who live in our most deprived communities are four and a half times more likely to die from alcohol-specific causes than those in the least deprived areas. Will the First Minister provide an update on the targeted intervention that his Government is taking, or might take, to address that inequality?

**The First Minister (John Swinney):** That is an important issue. As Carol Mochan indicated, the fall in alcohol-related deaths is welcome. However, there remain a large number of deaths as a consequence of alcohol harm. The Government has made strategic interventions around minimum unit pricing, which are designed to address the issue. I am pleased to see the progress that has been made as a consequence, and we have updated that policy approach.

The Government will take other steps in relation to public health education and advising individuals of the dangers of excess alcohol consumption. We also need to work collaboratively to ensure that all parts of the public and private sectors are working together to convey those messages. That will underpin our approach to the limitation of harm through taking steps on alcohol marketing and promotion. I am keen that we engage constructively with the industry to make sure that that is the case.

### Freight Vessels (Northern Isles)

**Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (LD):** The First Minister will be aware that the shortlist for the two new freight vessels for the northern isles will be announced shortly. I welcome the fact that new vessels are coming—I do not know anyone who does not. However, it has been reported that the shortlist will contain two shipyards in China and two yards in Turkey. Meanwhile, there is a shipyard some 70 miles from the Parliament that is owned by the Scottish Government, funded by the Scottish taxpayer and absolutely desperate for new work. When will the Scottish Government's procurement policy give adequate weighting to the economic benefits that awarding Scottish shipyards some contracts would reap? When will it finally give that yard some contracts?

**The First Minister (John Swinney):** No yard in the United Kingdom submitted returns on the northern isles freight contracts. Ferguson Marine did not enter the competition, as the vessels are

too large to be accommodated at the shipyard, so there is a reason why that was the case.

I am very sympathetic to the rest of the point that Mr Greene makes. The Government is engaging on the question of enabling every consideration to be given to ensure that the Ferguson Marine yard is able to receive work in due course; I have confirmed that to Parliament before.

We are seeing developments in the delivery of new ferries that have been commissioned. The MV Isle of Islay is currently on its final acceptance trials before coming from the yard in Turkey, and we look forward with anticipation to the vessel joining the fleet in due course. That is the first of four vessels that are coming to replenish the larger vessels in the Caledonian MacBrayne fleet, along with the Glen Rosa, which is close to completion at Ferguson Marine.

Mr Greene can be assured that the Government is investing substantially in the ferry network. I was delighted also to see the MV Caledonian Isles return to Ardrossan, from where I hope that, very shortly, it can recommence sailings to Arran. I am sure that that will bring much joy to Mr Greene and to his constituents.

### ScotRail (Performance)

**Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP):** New figures from the Office of Rail and Road show that Scotland has the lowest rate of train cancellations in the United Kingdom. Can the First Minister advise what assessment the Scottish Government has made of those findings? How is the Scottish National Party Scottish Government investing in our publicly owned rail services to deliver the best services for rail passengers in Scotland?

**The First Minister (John Swinney):** The data that Clare Haughey puts to Parliament is very significant indeed. The average across Great Britain for rail cancellations is 4.1 per cent, and the lowest cancellation level of any part of the United Kingdom is in the ScotRail network, at 2.2 per cent.

Performance has remained consistently strong, with punctuality at around 90 per cent across all three years of public ownership. I therefore say a very warm thank you to the staff of ScotRail, who work incredibly hard to ensure that we have a first-class rail service in Scotland. That service is outperforming those in the rest of the United Kingdom, with cancellation rates that are half those in the rest of the UK. That just shows what public ownership and SNP leadership can deliver.

**The Presiding Officer:** That concludes First Minister's question time. There will be a short suspension to allow people to leave the chamber and the public gallery.

12:47

*Meeting suspended.*

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](mailto:official.report@parliament.scot) or phone the official report on 0131 348 5447.



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