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Scottish Parliament

Thursday 2 October 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.

Jobcentres (Closure)

1. Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what engagement it has had with the United Kingdom Government regarding the closure of any jobcentres in Scotland. (S6O-05010)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Gaelic (Kate Forbes): We have raised the issue of jobcentre closures with UK Government counterparts, and we are concerned about the closure of the Cambuslang jobcentre in Clare Haughey's constituency. We will continue to engage with relevant stakeholders to assess the impact and explore ways to minimise disruption where necessary.

Clare Haughey: The Department for Work and Pensions has announced that the Cambuslang jobcentre in my constituency is to close. It was saved in 2017 after a huge outpouring of opposition to the previous proposed closure. Hundreds of local residents have signed my petition against the closure, and Cambuslang community council is actively involved in the campaign. It is now 10 weeks since I requested an urgent meeting with the UK Government, and I have had no response. Will the Deputy First Minister join me in opposing the closure and condemn the UK Government's lack of engagement with local representatives and the affected communities?

Kate Forbes: Cuts to services mean that people face greater travelling times and costs, which are particularly significant for disabled people and those with complex needs. People also face an increased risk of sanctions from having to travel longer distances to attend jobcentres at specific times. For those reasons, I absolutely join the representative for Rutherglen, Clare Haughey, and all the organisations that she has mentioned in opposing the closure. The lack of consultation prior to the decision is particularly unacceptable.

Biodegradable Municipal Waste

2. Maurice Golden (North East Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what the current state of readiness is for the upcoming ban on biodegradable municipal waste to landfill. (S6O-05011)

The Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Energy (Gillian Martin): The forthcoming ban on biodegradable waste to landfill is a crucial part of delivering Scotland's net zero ambitions. The waste sector has already made significant preparations, including by making significant investment in Scotland's infrastructure for energy from waste. As such, the amount of Scottish waste that was landfilled in 2023 was the lowest on record. The vast majority of councils have indicated readiness for the ban, and the remainder are progressing arrangements towards compliance. However, I am aware of the challenges that are faced by some in the sector, notably waste small and medium-sized enterprises. We are working with partners to support their readiness for the ban and to reduce any environmental impacts.

Maurice Golden: The landfill ban assurance study refers to external markets helping to manage any capacity shortfall from 2026. Will the cabinet secretary outline what those markets are and, if she is in a position to do so, outline when we will know where the waste will be sent to?

Gillian Martin: My plan is to have as much waste as possible, particularly biodegradable waste, dealt with in Scotland, in readiness. I note that there has been some media reporting on the potential for waste to go to England. I do not want that, and the First Minister has been very clear in the chamber that that will not happen.

I have had detailed discussions with representatives of the waste sector, who have been extremely helpful and constructive in their approach and are working with me, my Scottish Government teams and the Scottish Environment Protection Agency on a range of solutions for the issues that SMEs in the waste sector face. I cannot divulge those solutions at the moment, because they are still being fully agreed, but I hope to be able to let members and the Parliament know about them in the next few weeks.

Hydrogen (Development and Deployment)

3. David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how it will ensure that Scotland remains at the forefront of hydrogen development and deployment. (S6O-05012)

The Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Energy (Gillian Martin): The Scottish Government is committed to supporting the hydrogen sector in Scotland to develop and grow.

We are engaging with business and the United Kingdom Government on the enabling policies that are required and the investment, infrastructure and regulatory measures that need to be in place to realise the substantial opportunities for Scotland from the production and use of renewable and low-carbon hydrogen, given our renewable power potential in Scotland. We are working with Scotland's enterprise agencies to deliver our commitment to provide up to £10 million to the sector in 2025-26, with the aim of supporting production, infrastructure and usage projects.

David Torrance: With the H100 Fife hydrogen homes project close to launch, how is the Scottish Government working with regulators to ensure a smooth transition to hydrogen, to enable broader adaptation and adoption of similar technologies across Scotland and to build public confidence in hydrogen as a safe and sustainable energy source?

Gillian Martin: The use of hydrogen as an energy vector has been routine by industry in Scotland for many decades, mostly in petrochemical refining. However, hydrogen use for domestic heating is new and needs to be demonstrated. The H100 Fife project, which I have visited, will inform UK Government decisions on the role of hydrogen in decarbonising heat using the gas network.

We are working with Scottish and UK regulators through multiple channels, including the Scottish regulatory steering group and the UK hydrogen regulators forum, to ensure that the framework for hydrogen supports the scale-up of the sector while protecting the environment and communities.

Safety is absolutely fundamental, and the beauty of the H100 Fife project is that it can demonstrate that safety. Before the trial can go ahead, the Health and Safety Executive will have to be satisfied that it will run safely. If the HSE is satisfied, the evidence will demonstrate that the trial can run, which will provide the evidence to show that 100 per cent hydrogen, where applicable, can be used safely in a domestic setting.

Innovation and Entrepreneurship (Support)

4. Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide further details of the steps that it is taking to support innovation and entrepreneurship in Scotland. (S6O-05013)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Gaelic (Kate Forbes): We are fully committed to our support of innovation and entrepreneurship. During the recent national innovation week, we reaffirmed our commitment to supporting innovators by

announcing a £5 million package for Scotland's high-growth clusters, and we launched a new national programme to help businesses to adopt artificial intelligence. In addition, we are investing a record £30 million in various initiatives to support entrepreneurs. Through all those interventions, we aim to become one of Europe's fastest-growing start-up economies.

Gordon MacDonald: Will the Deputy First Minister provide a breakdown of the allocation of and expected outcomes from the ecosystem fund in 2025-26, particularly in regard to the supported projects and their impact on regional economies?

Kate Forbes: The ecosystem fund is our programme to support organisations that strengthen the wider entrepreneurial ecosystem by delivering projects that create the conditions for Scottish start-ups to thrive. Since 2021, the fund has invested £3.4 million across 100 innovative projects. The most recent round was launched in April, and, this year, we have awarded £800,000 to 28 projects from 317 applications, which demonstrates continued strong demand.

Northern Isles Ferry Services

5. Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will commit to reintroducing the "shared cabin" policy as a condition of the next northern isles ferry services contract. (S6O-05014)

The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie): I refer Liam McArthur to the response that I gave to written question S6W-35681. I reiterate:

"The detailed service requirements will be informed by a combination of stakeholder views alongside consideration of operational feasibility."

The NIFS public consultation remains open until 13 October. Pending the analysis of feedback, I note that

"There are no current plans to introduce shared cabins as part of the NIFS services."—[Written Answers, 26 March 2025; S6W-35681]

Liam McArthur: For years, the shared cabin policy on northern isles NorthLink ferries allowed islanders to get a good night's sleep on the Aberdeen route while keeping costs down. The option was removed during Covid, and NorthLink and ministers have since refused to reintroduce it. As a result, islanders are often forced to pay full cabin price for a single berth or face sleeping in chairs or on the floor. It is akin to charging a motorcyclist for deck space for an articulated lorry. Costs are up and the value of vouchers is down. The ferries are a lifeline service and islanders deserve better. Again, I urge the minister to ensure that reintroducing the option of shared

cabins is a condition of the next ferry services contract.

Jim Fairlie: I hear the points that Liam McArthur makes. There are split views on what the policy should be. It is an operational matter, and the decision was taken by the operator on a health and safety basis. A number of other options can be used on that ferry service. A conclusion will be reached on those views as we go through the process.

Decarbonising Homes

6. Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what discussions the climate action secretary has had with ministerial colleagues regarding how to encourage home owners to decarbonise their properties as part of Scotland's ambition to achieve net zero by 2045. (S6O-05015)

The Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Energy (Gillian Martin): As part of the development of the next climate change plan, I have had discussions with a range of colleagues, including the Cabinet Secretary for Housing, on heat in buildings in particular.

Decarbonising Scotland's buildings is essential to achieving net zero by 2045, because heat is one of the most significant sources of emissions. Our programme of support schemes and advice services helps home owners to play their part by funding a significant share of the decarbonisation cost. We are investing £300 million in 2025-26 in supporting more than 20,000 households to save up to £500 a year on their energy bills.

Bob Doris: At every opportunity, we must support home owners to decarbonise their properties, including by moving from heat systems that are reliant on fossil fuels to alternatives such as ground-source heat pumps. Often, however, when a heating system breaks down and is beyond repair, home owners need to move swiftly to secure heating and hot water for their families as soon as possible, particularly if they have small children or elderly relatives at home. That can necessitate the installation of a like-for-like system for speed—something that I have direct experience of. What action can the Scottish Government take to address barriers in switching to alternative heat sources in such circumstances, where time is of the essence and delays in installing good-enough heat systems might deter many?

Gillian Martin: I recognise the scenario that Mr Doris outlines, and I recognise that most home owners will replace like for like when an existing boiler breaks down, because it is an emergency purchase. Our support schemes are there to help

home owners either to replace their boiler with a clean heating system before that stage or to put plans in place for when their boiler reaches the end of its life.

The Home Energy Scotland grant and loan scheme helps people across Scotland plan for and install heat pumps, and more than 2,500 pumps have been funded by the scheme in the past financial year. We will shortly be launching a national campaign to promote Home Energy Scotland, which provides households with free, impartial advice on energy efficiency and clean heating and can help households access the support that is available. I would also note that Glasgow City Council is working at pace to plan for significant heat networks in the city, as part of its stated goal to be a net zero city.

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): Given the huge potential of heat pumps, will the Scottish Government consider reintroducing financial support for householders to install solar panels as a first step to installing heat pumps? Our constituents are now cancelling their plans to install heat pumps, which is bad news for our climate, for their homes and for the companies that make heat pumps in Scotland.

Gillian Martin: With the fiscal constraints at the moment, we have had to make some choices about where we put support. I would love to be in a position to extend the support available into other technologies such as the ones that Sarah Boyack mentions, but we have to look at where, with the funding that we have got, we can make the biggest difference to decarbonisation and have some effect on fuel poverty. If things improve in relation to our settlement from the United Kingdom Government, I will be able to take measures such as the ones that Sarah Boyack has outlined.

Public Body Officials

7. Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): Given the time, maybe I should speak slowly, Presiding Officer.

To ask the Scottish Government what measures it has in place to ensure that public body officials do not misuse their position for personal gain. (S6O-05016)

The Minister for Public Finance (Ivan McKee): Public body officials must adhere to the Scottish public finance manual. Scottish Government-sponsored bodies must ensure compliance with any relevant provisions and arrange for procedures that are consistent with the guidance to be put in place.

Board members establish the values and standards of their organisation and ensure that the organisation adopts and complies with its code of conduct for staff. The Scottish Government

ensures that board members are aware of their responsibilities through annual board induction events and the production of guidance. The Standards Commission for Scotland provides further detailed guidance through a model code of conduct and guidance on how it applies.

Stephen Kerr: I am grateful to the minister for his reply. In relation to the conduct of senior officials, given the on-going disclosures in the public interest at Historic Environment Scotland, Glasgow City Council and Techscaler on matters that would never have seen the light of day were it not for the courage of individuals in being prepared to speak out, often in the face of intimidation and the threat of retaliation, will the minister take the opportunity to commend the bravery of whistleblowers and to acknowledge the vital role that they play in safeguarding the public interest? Does he accept that it is often only the guarantee of anonymity that gives whistleblowers the courage to make a protected disclosure to a prescribed person in the first instance?

Ivan McKee: I am aware of the issues in connection with Historic Environment Scotland. Stephen Kerr knows that my colleague Angus Robertson, the Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture, is seized of those matters. We are delighted that HES has a new and highly commended chairman in Sir Mark Jones, who will look closely at governance and other matters.

On the broader issue that Stephen Kerr raised, I absolutely commend the whistleblowing that takes place, because it is important in keeping the whole public sector system in check and in raising awareness of where there might be potential issues that need to be addressed.

Scotland's Rural College

8. Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will change the college and university funding frameworks to reflect the hybrid nature of Scotland's Rural College, which has both higher and further education provision. (S6O-05017)

The Minister for Higher and Further Education (Ben Macpherson): The Scottish Government absolutely recognises the important role of hybrid institutions such as the SRUC, which support the delivery of both further and higher education. The current framework allows the Scottish Funding Council to fund institutions to support both provision types.

As the member will be aware, it is the Scottish Funding Council that is responsible for allocating funding to institutions. However, I would be interested to hear more from him on the issue of funding frameworks.

Willie Rennie: The SRUC has been through the mill in recent years. It has had significant problems with its finances, which have resulted in the closure of buildings and courses, and although it has a huge estate that it inherited from its predecessors, it gets a fraction of the capital funding from the Scottish Funding Council that I think that it deserves. Therefore, I would appreciate it if the minister could have a discussion with the SFC to ensure that the special hybrid nature of the SRUC is reflected in the finances that are available to it.

Ben Macpherson: I am aware of the contribution that the SRUC makes, not only because of my present role but because of my time as Minister for Rural Affairs and the Natural Environment in years past.

I was grateful to receive direct correspondence from the SRUC on my appointment on 29 September, and I am aware of the engagement that my predecessor had with the organisation. I look forward to having further direct engagement with the SRUC on the matters that the member has raised and on other matters of pertinence to the organisation, and to having continued dialogue with the SFC. I will note the points that the member has raised as I undertake that dialogue in the period ahead.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. Once again, I forgot to declare an interest as a director of WhistleblowersUK, which is a not-for-profit company that has set up a campaign for a more favourable legislative framework for whistleblowing.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Kerr. Your comments are on the record.

Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): The minister will be aware that, this week, the United Kingdom Government has moved to reintroduce grant support for students on low incomes—and about time, too. Can he confirm that the policy of utilising international student income for that purpose will not affect Scotland's universities? How do the new measures in England compare with what the Scottish National Party already provides by way of support to students?

Ben Macpherson: The matters that the member raises in relation to the UK Government's announcement are matters of concern that the Scottish Government will consider. We will continue to make sure that, through free tuition and the enhanced support that is provided in Scotland, learners in Scotland receive the most support in the UK and that the total package of support that is provided here is the most generous in the UK. We will make sure that Scottish students continue to have the lowest average

student loan debt in the UK, and we are committed to free tuition, as the Parliament well knows.

First Minister's Question Time

12:00

Disposable Income

1. Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): I begin by noting the horrific attack on the Jewish community in Manchester this morning. I send our very best wishes to all those who have been affected.

Disposable income is what people have left to spend after paying their taxes and their bills. Put simply, it is about how many pounds they have left in their pockets. Scottish Conservatives have analysed Office for National Statistics data that reveals that the average Scottish household now has less disposable income, in real terms, than it did in 2007. People in Scotland are worse off than when John Swinney and the Scottish National Party came to power. He must surely be ashamed of that fact.

The First Minister (John Swinney): Before I answer Mr Findlay's question, I express my horror at the attack on a synagogue in Manchester this morning. The attack came on Yom Kippur, the holiest time in the Jewish calendar, and my thoughts are with the victims, their families and all the Jewish communities in Scotland and across the United Kingdom. I record our thanks and appreciation to the emergency services and the first responders for the speed of their response.

Antisemitism is an evil that we must confront and stand resolutely against. I know that the whole Parliament speaks with one voice on such an important question. *[Applause.]*

I acknowledge the pressures that families face on household incomes. That is why, at the start of September, the Scottish Government took another step to assist families by abolishing peak rail fares for good. For instance, a commuter from Glasgow to Edinburgh will save in excess of £12 a day on their travel. That is just one example of how the Scottish Government is trying to support the household incomes of individuals.

Of course, one of the reasons why our economy has struggled in recent years is the effect of Brexit, which has made every single one of us poorer. Responsibility for that lies with the Conservative United Kingdom Government, which delivered the Brexit that it did.

Russell Findlay: SNP tax rises mean that most Scots now pay more tax than do people who are doing the same job in the rest of the United Kingdom. Scottish workers fear being hit yet again by Labour. Rachel Reeves has been asked to rule out tax rises. She has been asked to do that at

least 10 times, but she refuses to do it. People in Scotland already have fewer pounds in their pockets. They cannot afford ever-increasing taxation. Labour will not be up front about tax rises, so will the SNP? *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Let us hear Mr Findlay.

Russell Findlay: Will John Swinney rule out any tax rises for workers in Scotland in his next budget?

The First Minister: As part of my public duty, I must correct what Mr Findlay has said. Mr Findlay was wrong, because more than half of taxpayers in Scotland continue to pay less tax than they would if they lived elsewhere in the United Kingdom.

I know that it is important that we all speak accurately to Parliament. It is a duty—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear the First Minister.

The First Minister: It is a duty that I faithfully deploy—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Colleagues, let us hear one another.

The First Minister: It is a duty that I faithfully deploy, and I will also point it out when Mr Findlay misleads the Parliament with incorrect information—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Thank you.

The First Minister: Mr Findlay knows full well—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: We are not having pointing and shouting from our seats. First Minister, please continue.

The First Minister: Mr Findlay knows full well that the Government will set out its tax plans in the budget in an orderly and rational fashion. As a consequence of that, the Parliament will be able to scrutinise the Government's financial provisions.

I reiterate the point that I have just made: more than half of taxpayers in Scotland continue to pay less than they would if they lived elsewhere in the United Kingdom. I am very proud of that fact.

Russell Findlay: This First Minister leads a Government that does not know the difference between fact and fiction. Workers in Scotland know exactly how much tax the SNP is forcing them to pay.

The next Scottish budget must bring down costs for families and businesses, but it must also give greater opportunities to young people. The SNP has inflicted economic damage on Scotland by

slashing college budgets. Today, Audit Scotland revealed that the Scottish Government has cut college funding by 20 per cent in real terms since the most recent Holyrood election. SNP cuts mean fewer people going to college, learning new skills and advancing their careers. Reducing funding for colleges directly harms economic growth, which is something that the SNP does not seem to understand. Will John Swinney commit to reversing that cut, for the good of young Scots and for the good of Scotland's economy?

The First Minister: First, as a consequence of the Government's investment and of our approach to the education system, 93 per cent of young people who leave school go on to positive destinations such as work, training—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear the First Minister.

The First Minister: —or further study, including attendance at our colleges.

The most recent Scottish Funding Council allocations provided a 2.6 per cent increase in teaching funding for 2025-26 and an increase of almost 5 per cent in capital maintenance funding to help colleges invest further in the learning experience of students.

This Government is absolutely committed to ensuring that we invest in our college sector to support students to move on to positive destinations, but the challenges that we face in managing our public finances have not in any way been helped by the austerity policies of the Conservatives and the folly of the Liz Truss budget, which Russell Findlay supported.

Russell Findlay: He always comes unstuck when he comes face to face with the facts produced by Audit Scotland.

Cutting college funding limits the opportunities for young people and harms our economy. The SNP's chaotic and irresponsible approach means that there is less money for schools, hospitals, roads and everything else that needs to be fixed. Public services keep declining, yet taxes, household bills and everyday costs continue to rise. Whether John Swinney likes it or not, it is a fact that people in Scotland are worse off after 18 years of SNP Government.

Workers could face a double whammy of taxes in the upcoming Labour and SNP budgets. Is that all John Swinney has to offer Scotland—higher bills and worse public services?

The First Minister: I point out to Mr Findlay that the Scottish Government operates and delivers a balanced budget in every single year and that we have done so since 2007.

In relation to household bills, I have already cited the impact of the step that we have taken on peak rail fares. Council tax in Scotland is lower than for comparable properties in England, water bills are lower in Scotland than in England, and we have free prescriptions that help household incomes here in Scotland. We have free eye examinations in Scotland—a great preventative measure that helps with the cost of living—and we also have students who go to university without paying any tuition fees, unlike the situation in England.

In Scotland, we make responsible use of public finances, compared with the chaos and austerity of the Conservatives, and I am proud to defend the record of this Government.

The Presiding Officer: Many members wish to put questions today. We will be better able to get more members in if we conduct ourselves appropriately.

Colleges

2. Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab): I am horrified by the news that is coming out of Manchester today. Like others, my thoughts are with all those who are affected and the wider Jewish community. Yom Kippur should be a time of peace and reflection. Instead, the community has been the victim of hate and violence. We must all stand against antisemitism and all forms of prejudice and hate.

This morning, a scathing Audit Scotland report laid bare the Scottish National Party's failure to support our colleges and young people: a 20 per cent real-terms cut to colleges over the past five years, 30,000 fewer Scots getting college places, and a cash crisis that is putting jobs, institutions and college places at risk. When Scotland needs a new generation of skilled workers, why are apprenticeships and colleges of less value to the SNP than universities?

The First Minister (John Swinney): That is not the case. Last year, more than 35,000 people started a modern apprenticeship in Scotland. A record 39,000 individuals are now in training, including 20,000 who are aged 16 to 19—an increase of 2.8 per cent on the previous year. That is a consequence of the Government's investment. Let me reiterate what that investment was, because there was a lot of noise when I stated it a little while ago. The Scottish Funding Council allocations provide a 2.6 per cent increase in teaching funding for 2025-26 and an increase of almost 5 per cent in capital maintenance funding to help colleges to invest in their estates. In addition to the investment that we are making in apprenticeships and in the college sector, the Scottish Government is investing in the skills of

the future, which is exactly what the Government should do.

Anas Sarwar: "Devastating"—that is how one student described the news that Forth Valley College's Alloa campus faces closure. It seems that the First Minister would rather put his head in the sand and ignore Audit Scotland than confront the issues. Anne-Marie Harley, a lecturer at the college, said that the social benefits of what colleges do are not recognised by the SNP Government. Working-class kids are being let down by the SNP and by John Swinney—not for the first time. The future of Forth Valley College, which is home to thousands of students, is now at risk due to the financial crisis that has been caused by the SNP. Will John Swinney intervene to save the Alloa campus?

The First Minister: That subject has been uppermost in my mind after the representations that were made by my friend Keith Brown, the member for Clackmannanshire and Dunblane. Those issues are very much at the forefront of my mind. The education secretary is actively involved on my behalf and at my instruction in finding a way through the situation that will protect the future of the Alloa campus. For me, the Alloa campus is essential because it is located in an area of deprivation in our country and we must maximise access to learning. That is what my political agenda is about—ensuring that local communities that live in deprivation have access to learning facilities to enhance their prospects. That is what the Government is working to resolve today.

Anas Sarwar: So why is the campus under threat? A 20 per cent real-terms cut was made by this SNP Government. The First Minister cannot dodge the record.

The SNP often speaks about tackling inequality but fails to deliver when it comes to educating our children. Some 60 per cent of young Scots do not go to university, and working-class kids are more likely to go to college. However, our colleges are in crisis. That is directly on John Swinney, a failed former education secretary who—let us not forget—shamefully downgraded the results of working-class kids during the pandemic. Now, his SNP Government refuses to fund a new welding centre on the Clyde, forcing Labour to intervene in order to secure those skilled jobs. Livelihoods and futures are being derailed by SNP incompetence. Colleges are facing cuts, courses are being scrapped and futures are being denied. Why does this snooty, elitist SNP Government refuse to recognise the value of Scotland's colleges?

Members: Oh!

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear one another.

The First Minister: Where do I start on all of that? My goodness. I do not think that lecturing me, a state school boy, about elitism is a great look for Mr Sarwar. I am very proud of my state school education.

Let us take that question apart bit by bit. On tackling inequality, this is the only part of the United Kingdom where child poverty is going down. That is because of the leadership of my Government and because of my leadership as First Minister. Some 93 per cent of young people are going on to positive destinations from our schools. When it comes to big, lofty commitments, I stood beside Mr Sarwar, who told me that there would be hundreds of millions of pounds to save Grangemouth. Grangemouth got absolutely nothing, and it has now closed. Mr Sarwar should go home and think again.

Land Reform

3. Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): The Scottish Greens and I, like colleagues from across the chamber, send our thoughts, prayers, love and solidarity to the victims of the attack on Heaton Park synagogue and to the whole Jewish community. It will cast a long shadow over Yom Kippur worship this evening.

Scotland is a country of 5 million people, but fewer than 500 people and companies own half of this country's land. Many of them do not even live here. They are a motley crew including aristocrats, billionaires and minor royals from across the world. In some cases, we do not even know who they are—three quarters of a million acres are owned from tax havens such as the Cayman Islands. More Scottish land is owned by corporations and the super rich now than it was when the First Minister's party took office in 2007.

Later this month, the Scottish Government will ask MSPs to vote for the new Land Reform (Scotland) Bill, which will not break up big estates or redistribute land from billionaires to the people of Scotland. I ask the First Minister, with less Scottish land in the hands of the people now than in 2007, is his Government just scared of those billionaires?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The Government has taken a number of steps over a number of years to enable the purchase of land by communities, to support developments that have enhanced community opportunities in a range of different parts of the country. I have had the privilege of seeing at first hand the number of productive benefits of community land ownership.

As Mr Greer knows, the Land Reform (Scotland) Bill will be before Parliament over the course of the next few weeks. Parliament will have the opportunity to scrutinise the proposals, and we

will, of course, be open to dialogue about any of them, to determine how we can ensure that the land asset of Scotland is used for the benefit of the people of Scotland, which is what underpins the Government's policy agenda.

Ross Greer: I planned to follow up with another question about the specifics of the bill, but four Scots—including my constituent Sid Khan—were kidnapped by the Israeli military last night, and I feel that I must raise that in Parliament today.

The Scots were part of the global sumud flotilla, which is made up of dozens of ships and hundreds of ordinary people who are doing what the world's governments have refused to do—they are trying to break Israel's siege of Gaza and deliver life-saving goods and medical supplies to starving Palestinians. They have had their boats attacked by drones and have had chemicals dropped on them, and last night they were attacked by the Israeli navy. Not one boat made it to Gaza. Will the First Minister demand the immediate release of the four kidnapped Scots? Will he contact the Prime Minister and urge him to intervene? Given that his Government agreed to the Greens' proposal that Scotland join the global boycott campaign against Israel, what actions will he take to force an end to the genocide?

The Presiding Officer: First Minister, please respond to the matters that relate to your responsibilities.

The First Minister: I am aware of the incident that Mr Greer raises, and I have seen the comments from Sid Khan, one of the individuals who is involved in the situation. This morning, I asked officials from the Scottish Government to seek an update from the United Kingdom's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, which was forthcoming. I am grateful for the information from the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, which has informed us that it has lobbied the Israeli Government to respect the law and protect the safety of everyone on board. We will keep in close contact with the United Kingdom Government regarding the wellbeing of those on the flotilla.

In relation to the subsequent issues that Mr Greer raised about the actions of the Scottish Government, I set out in my statement to Parliament on 3 September the actions that the Government is taking, and I assure Mr Greer that those have been followed up by the Government.

United Kingdom Digital Identity Scheme

4. Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): To ask the First Minister, regarding the potential impact on marginalised communities and public services in Scotland, what the Scottish Government's response is to UK Government

proposals to introduce a mandatory digital ID scheme. (S6F-04356)

The First Minister (John Swinney): I do not support the introduction of a mandatory digital ID scheme by the United Kingdom Government. People must be able to access public services through the channel that works for them. That might be a digital route, face-to-face services or another method. We are engaging regularly with the UK Government to obtain further detail beyond the announced use, which is right-to-work checks, and to further understand the implications of the proposed digital ID system for Scotland and our communities.

Gordon MacDonald: It is wrong to force people to share their data simply in order to go about their daily life. Keir Starmer's proposal serves as another distraction from the very real issues that the UK faces. Does the First Minister share my concern about the security of people's personal data and how the UK Government may seek to use it, as well as the barriers that will be put in the way of vulnerable people who already experience digital exclusion?

The First Minister: Mr MacDonald raises important issues about digital exclusion. Many of the proposals, which could have an effect on some of the most vulnerable in our society—particularly people with disabilities and, in some circumstances, older people—have to be entirely considered as part of the exercise. The use of digital access to public services is appropriate in many circumstances, when individuals are willing to participate in that, but we must act to avoid digital exclusion in all circumstances.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I agree with the First Minister's stance on the issue. I say gently to him that he would have more credibility on those issues had he not been such an evangelist for the Scottish National Party's hated named person policy, which was struck down by the courts for being an infringement of personal privacy.

What does the First Minister think is the worst aspect of the proposal? Is it the likely extortionate costs, the inevitable failure of the information technology systems, the risk of a data breach or the affront to civil liberty?

The First Minister: Those issues have to be looked at as part of the consideration of the ID cards proposition. I note that, prior to the Prime Minister's announcement, in the early summer, net support in opinion polls for digital ID cards stood at 35 per cent. After the Prime Minister announced the proposal, it fell to minus 14 per cent. It seems to be the case that whatever the Prime Minister touches turns to dust.

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Reform): In a Scottish Government document from 2021 entitled "A Changing Nation: How Scotland will Thrive in a Digital World", we were told that the Government would introduce a digital identity service that would apparently be "trusted and secure" and would enable users

"to prove who they are, and that they are eligible for a service."

Now that the First Minister is apparently against such intrusion into our lives, can we assume that those plans will not reappear?

The First Minister: There is a fundamental difference here, which is about the opportunity to access public services through digital means if individuals wish to do so. That is different from the mandatory proposition that is being advanced by the United Kingdom Government, which is, as my colleague Gordon MacDonald indicated, a distraction from the real difficulties that the Government faces. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear one another.

Time Bar (Sam Eljamel)

5. Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government's position is on whether NHS Tayside should exempt legal claims by former patients of Professor Sam Eljamel from the three-year time bar which is currently in place. (S6F-04345)

The First Minister (John Swinney): As Liz Smith will know, I am familiar with those issues from my engagement as First Minister and as a constituency member with constituents affected by the issue. My thoughts are very much with the patients of Professor Eljamel. That is precisely why we launched the public inquiry that is now under way, to ensure that patients can obtain answers to their questions and that lessons are learned.

We fully expect NHS Tayside to consider all the facts and circumstances fairly and on a case-by-case basis, including when considering whether to plead that a case is time barred. The courts already have the power to allow an action to proceed out of time by overriding the time bar, if they see fit.

Liz Smith: The sentence that the First Minister just quoted was exactly what the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care, Neil Gray, said in a letter to the patients. I repeat:

"the courts already have the power to enable an action to proceed by overriding the time bar."

As the public inquiry continues to uncover a whole lot of information that was previously unknown to some of those patients, they are, quite reasonably,

asking for the time bar to be lifted. I ask the First Minister for a categorical assurance that the Scottish Government has made section 19A of the Prescription and Limitation (Scotland) Act 1973 clear to NHS Tayside, allowing the ministers to ensure that NHS Tayside will lift the time bar, which is clearly a major barrier to getting at the truth.

The First Minister: First, I acknowledge Liz Smith's long-standing engagement on the issue. I hope that the words that I have put on the official record of Parliament give her some reassurance. I said two things in my opening answer. The first is that we fully expect NHS Tayside to consider all the facts and circumstances fairly on a case-by-case basis, including when considering whether to plead that a case is time barred. That point has been made clearly to NHS Tayside.

Secondly, it is a matter of fact, which Liz Smith acknowledges, that the courts already have the power to allow an action to proceed out of time by overriding the time bar if they see fit. That is for the courts to determine, so it is not for me, as First Minister, to make that clear, but the bit that I can make clear is what the health secretary has already done, which is to make it plain to NHS Tayside that we expect the issue to be considered on a case-by-case basis. We have not proceeded on a general basis—it has to be handled on a case-by-case basis. We have made that clear to NHS Tayside, and the courts have the ability to apply that discretion, should they judge that to be appropriate. That is the right place for the issue to be handled.

I hope that that provides the reassurance that Liz Smith seeks. If she would like further reassurance, she knows that the health secretary and I will engage with her and other members who are invested in the issue.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): I thank the First Minister for his detailed and considered answer, which is helpful. However, I am standing here to make sure that it is fully understood by all those in positions of power and in the courts that there is a strength of feeling from Michael Marra, Liz Smith, me and many others who have constituents who have suffered for years. They have waited for years, and only now is the truth beginning to be fully established, thanks to the public inquiry. I reinforce the point that, if we can lift the time bar, it should be lifted so that compensation can be made available to those who have suffered for far too long.

The First Minister: Mr Rennie gives me an opportunity to reinforce the point that I made to Liz Smith, which is that it is the Government's expectation that NHS Tayside will consider actively, on a case-by-case basis, whether the time bar should be used as a plea or not. That is

influenced by the circumstances and the details that emerge. The point that Mr Rennie makes about new information emerging as part of the public inquiry is absolutely material to that consideration, and I hope that that provides him with assurance.

I acknowledge Mr Rennie's long-standing interest in this question. For me, it is vital that members of the public who have suffered are able to get to the truth and have no legal obstacles to being able to pursue that truth.

National Health Service

6. Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government's response is to reported comments from the chair of the British Medical Association in Scotland, that Scotland's NHS is "dying before our eyes". (S6F-04352)

The First Minister (John Swinney): As I have indicated to Parliament on a number of occasions, I acknowledge the pressures that our national health service faces, but let me provide some context about the situation that we find ourselves in at this time. Waits are coming down in the NHS. More than 95 per cent of patients who are diagnosed with cancer in Scotland are starting treatment within 31 days. Statistics this week show that the median wait for treatment was two days—the joint lowest on record. Ninety-seven per cent of discharges from Scottish hospitals happen without delay. The latest accident and emergency figures show that July 2025 had the lowest number of eight and 12-hour waits for any month since September 2023. The number of operations that were performed in July was the highest in five years—8.9 per cent higher than in July last year. General practitioner numbers are up, and the numbers of nurses, midwives and staff working in our NHS are also up.

There are challenges, but the Government is investing to support the national health service.

Jackie Baillie: The verdict from Dr Kennedy, who is a front-line clinician, is a damning indictment on this Scottish National Party Government. He says that "the system is broken"—his words, not mine. Let us take cancer as an example. The last time that the Scottish National Party met its 62-day treatment target was 13 years ago. The number of cancer cases is now at a record high, and the number of deaths has increased, too.

The poorest communities are being hit the hardest by the SNP's failures on cancer. Data from 2022 showed that the incidence of cancer was 24 per cent higher for the most deprived Scots compared with the least deprived. However, this week, the Government refused to publish the

latest data on cancer and deprivation. Why is the Government fiddling with the figures yet again? What is it hiding? The First Minister cannot allow people to die early because they live in our poorest communities. What will he do to end the cancer postcode lottery?

The First Minister: I acknowledge the challenges with the 62-day cancer target. However, once someone has been identified as having a cancer diagnosis, the median wait on the 31-day pathway is two days, and the 95 per cent standard has been met again by the national health service. Those are important steps.

I say to Jackie Baillie that the risk of dying from cancer in Scotland is now at a record low, with an 11.1 per cent reduction in mortality rate since 2013. Although I acknowledge that there are still many pressures in the national health service, I hope that those two statistics—the median wait of two days for cancer treatment against the successfully met 31-day target; and the risk of dying from cancer in Scotland being at a record low—will provide Jackie Baillie with reassurance that the Government is focused on treating and supporting patients in all communities in Scotland. I am absolutely determined to ensure that we tackle issues of inequality. That is at the heart of the Government's strategy and drives our policy approach.

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): Ms Baillie did not say that Dr Kennedy's assessment of our NHS also stated:

"if it wasn't for international medical graduates and doctors coming from overseas, the NHS would have ... collapsed."

We know that Westminster and Labour's anti-immigration policies are frustrating the efforts of overseas medical staff to come to Scotland and support our health and social care services. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear one another.

Clare Adamson: Will the First Minister join me in calling for the Prime Minister to rethink harmful anti-immigration policies?

The First Minister: Clare Adamson raises a significant issue about the flow of individuals coming to work in our national health service. In the year ending in June 2025, there was a 77 per cent drop in the number of health and care worker visas that were granted by the Home Office. Scottish Care data indicates that 26 per cent of social care workers in our social care system have come from another country. That tells us that we depend on a flow of individuals coming into Scotland to support our national health service. That is being made more difficult, if not impossible, by the actions of the Labour Government. If Jackie

Baillie is interested in solutions, she should try to persuade the United Kingdom Labour Government to take a different course that will help our national health service.

The Presiding Officer: We move to constituency and general supplementary questions.

World Ostomy Day

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): The Parliament will know that 4 October is world ostomy day. Ostomates will know that, although a bag may be needed for life, it gives them back their life.

In 2023, with the support of the previous First Minister, I launched five asks on behalf of Scottish ostomates, yet only one has been delivered. Will the First Minister acknowledge the importance of care and choice for ostomates? Will he ask the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care to meet me to see how we can progress the remaining asks before the Parliament is dissolved?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I pay tribute to Edward Mountain, who has given exemplary personal leadership on this issue, and I thank him for his contribution to the debate. I am very happy to ask the health secretary to meet Mr Mountain. I will ask for an update on the conversation to satisfy myself that everything that can be done is being done to address the past commitments that were given to Mr Mountain in order to assist in strengthening the care that is available for those who are affected.

Moira Anderson

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): The First Minister will be aware of reports this week that new information has emerged in the case of Moira Anderson, who disappeared in Coatbridge in 1957, aged just 11. It is reported that the new information is credible and suggests that Moira's remains could be in an old mineshaft in the town.

Will the First Minister join me, as well as Sandra Brown OBE, founder of the Moira Anderson Foundation, in urging Police Scotland to continue to follow up on all leads, including this latest one? I know that the First Minister will share my hope that, one day, Moira will be located, bringing long-overdue peace for her, her family and the whole Monklands community, who have borne this tragedy down several generations for nearly 70 years.

The First Minister (John Swinney): I am aware of the reports that Mr MacGregor raises with me. At the outset of my answer, I express my sympathies to the family of Moira Anderson and

congratulate those who are involved in the Moira Anderson Foundation, which is a wonderful organisation, and especially Sandra Brown, who gives such exemplary leadership to its activity. Sandra Brown and her colleagues have never lost their determination to solve the case of Moira Anderson's disappearance.

I cannot comment on operational policing matters, but I am aware that Police Scotland has stated that any new information that it receives relating to the case will be fully assessed and investigated. It is an absolute priority for us to ensure that unresolved homicides are addressed. Those cases are never closed. As we have seen in recent years, the success of Police Scotland in investigating and resolving some of those cases has brought peace to many individuals who have had to live with the torment of losing a loved one. I hope dearly that that can be the case in relation to Moira Anderson.

Global Sumud Flotilla

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): The First Minister has already addressed the question of what happened last night, when the global sumud flotilla was illegally intercepted by Israeli forces. There are four Scots in the flotilla: my friend Sid Khan, who was mentioned earlier, Margaret Pacetta, Jim Hickey and Yvonne Ridley. They were sailing in international waters and, when I heard from them at about 6 o'clock last night, were about to approach the 12-mile zone around Gaza, which is now recognised as Palestinian territory by the UK Government.

I am aware that Hamish Faulkner, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Middle East, Afghanistan and Pakistan, has already contacted Israeli officials, and we are hopeful that we will see the safe return of those people pretty soon.

Does the First Minister agree that Israel is in breach of international law and had no right to be on board or to seize any of those boats in the first place? Does he agree that there is a great deal of courage among the 500 people across the world who took part in the flotilla, whose aim, apart from taking the aid, was to show Palestinians in Gaza that the world has not forgotten them and acknowledges how isolated they feel?

The Presiding Officer: I call the First Minister to answer with regard to devolved responsibilities.

The First Minister (John Swinney): I associate myself entirely with the analysis of the situation that Pauline McNeill has set out. I welcome the commitments that have been made by Hamish Faulkner, who is the responsible minister in the United Kingdom Government. I have had the privilege of discussing these issues with Mr

Faulkner and Mr Sarwar at the Palestinian embassy in the past couple of weeks.

There is a range of issues involved in this area, and many of us are concerned that Israel is operating outside the scope of international law. All of us have lived through a time in which there has been a rules-based system in the world and international law has been respected. However, we are living in a world now where that is feeling very frayed, and—Pauline McNeill and I will be absolutely at one on this—we have to return to a rules-based international system that will protect individuals, especially our citizens who have bravely decided to go to the aid of the Palestinian people. I commend them for their courage, I pray for their safety and I assure Pauline McNeill that the Scottish Government will do all that we can to work with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, for whose assistance I express my appreciation, in trying to ensure their safety in the days to come.

Energy Debt

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): New figures from Energy Action Scotland show that energy debt has soared to a record £4.4 billion in just four years, with vulnerable Scots burdened with £400 million of that. It is a disgrace that, in an energy-rich country, so many people are in fuel poverty, and especially that, under a Labour United Kingdom Government that pledged to cut bills, the energy price cap has risen again to £1,755. Does the First Minister share my concern that Labour—the UK Government—has lost control of the cost of living crisis? Can he set out what the Scottish Government is doing to support households in the face of the UK Government's inaction?

The Presiding Officer: Please answer with a focus on devolved responsibilities, First Minister.

The First Minister (John Swinney): Karen Adam is absolutely correct that average energy costs were supposed to have fallen by £300, but they are now nearly £200 higher than they were at the time of the UK general election last year. I share her concern about the energy costs for households in Scotland. Through our budget this year, the Scottish Government continues to allocate more than £3 billion a year to policies that tackle poverty and the cost of living, with more than £300 million for energy efficiency and clean heating and more than £196 million for winter benefits. We will take forward further commitments in that respect in the budget that will come to Parliament in due course.

Visitor Levy (Transition Period)

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): The visitor levy came into effect in Edinburgh yesterday, yet the final guidance for businesses was published only

last week. The owner of Linwater caravan park has contacted me, stating that

“Accommodation Providers are reporting to me that Booking systems have been unable to adapt in time, particularly to the 5-night rule; meaning”

many

“small operators now face the choice of applying the 5% levy incorrectly to all nights or inputting it manually for every booking.

This is creating significant risks of error, bank refund fees, and an extra administrative burden that small businesses can ill afford.”

I believe that it is unreasonable to expect those businesses to request the redesign of global booking systems and processes in just a few working days, especially when they have been seeking clarity from the council since July. What support can the Scottish Government offer to those businesses during this transition period?

The First Minister (John Swinney): Parliament legislated for the visitor levy scheme on the basis that it would be designed, taken forward and administered at a local level by individual local authorities. The issues that Sue Webber raises with me are matters for the City of Edinburgh Council under the Visitor Levy (Scotland) Act 2024. It is important that we respect the local autonomy of local authorities. I am often encouraged by the Conservatives to respect the local autonomy of local authorities and, in this case, I intend to do so.

University of Dundee (Recovery Plan)

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): This week, hundreds of staff left the University of Dundee, ending countless years of collective service. Their loss is keenly felt by their colleagues and students, and results from a crisis for which they bear no responsibility. I know that the First Minister will join me in sending them best wishes and thanks.

Has the First Minister had the chance to catch up on the astonishing scenes at yesterday's Education, Children and Young People Committee? The trade unions and I and other MSPs were told by ministers that the latest version of the university's recovery plan from management had been rejected, and rightly so. Yet yesterday, the Scottish Funding Council said that it had been neither rejected nor approved—it is not alive and not dead. Can the First Minister provide proper clarity on the standing of that zombie plan, so that the remaining staff, who are looking on ever more anxiously, can know what on earth is going on?

The First Minister (John Swinney): In dialogue with the Funding Council, the Government is taking forward an approach with the University of Dundee—which I have repeated

to Parliament on numerous occasions—that will protect the character and identity of the University of Dundee and its significance within the city's economy and the regional and national economies of Scotland. The original proposals that came forward from the University of Dundee were unacceptable to the Government, because that test would not have been met. That is the test that the Government is applying.

There will obviously be the development of individual plans, and I appreciate the importance, necessity and urgency of clarity about plans. That is what the Government is working on with the Funding Council. However, I assure Mr Marra that, in response to its willingness to invest to support the university's transition, what the Government is seeking is a university that will remain the strong asset to the city, region and country that the University of Dundee is. That is the test that we are applying to those plans.

Energy Sector (Jobs and Skills in North-east Scotland)

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): I warmly welcome the Scottish Government's work to respond to the immediate priorities of energy businesses in my constituency and across the north-east, with £8.5 million of new funding for clean energy careers. It is vital that we continue to support the communities that, through oil and gas, provided energy security for generations and that, as the country accelerates towards a clean energy future, we ensure that those communities remain at the centre of Scotland's energy future. Will the First Minister say more about the steps that the Scottish Government is taking to support jobs and skills in the north-east, particularly in the face of Labour's challenging fiscal regime?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I welcome the investments that the Government has made in this policy area. On Monday, I had the pleasure of opening the energy transition skills hub in the city of Aberdeen, which is the result of £4.5 million of investment from our just transition fund and an excellent collaboration involving North East Scotland College, ETZ Ltd and Shell UK, which have been significant partners in bringing about that development. That is one example of the steps that have been taken, and it was a pleasure to see Audrey Nicoll at the event on Monday in Aberdeen.

On the energy profits levy, I have made it crystal clear to the Parliament that I think that the levy has gone on for far too long and is set at too high a level. That is an issue that the United Kingdom Government must address, and I hope that it does so.

Scottish Stroke Care Standards

Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):

The 2025 Scottish stroke improvement report shows that, in my region of Mid Scotland and Fife, only 67 per cent of stroke patients in NHS Fife, 53 per cent in NHS Tayside and 40 per cent in NHS Forth Valley received a full stroke care bundle on admission. That is a serious failure given that the required standard is 80 per cent. Across Scotland, not a single health board met the standard, with just 53 per cent of patients across the country receiving the bundle.

The Scottish Government now wants to introduce a revised 100 per cent standard, which I welcome. However, given that we are not close to meeting the standard now, how will the Government ensure that health board management teams and, more importantly, the named person for stroke are accountable for meeting the standard? What immediate action will be taken to support our hard-working stroke clinical teams so that they can give patients the effective care that they urgently need and deserve?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The fundamental point at the heart of Roz McCall's question is the importance of ensuring that patients who suffer a stroke can be provided with the rehabilitation and support they need to enable their recovery. When that is provided, in many cases, recovery is very strong as a consequence. The importance and urgency of the question are not lost on me. The steps that the Government is taking to ensure that we have a better flow-through of patients in our healthcare system are designed to ensure that patients receive the support that they require in hospital and, ideally, at home. Measures such as the hospital at home service are designed to assist in that respect, too, to enable the rehabilitation of individuals who have suffered health incidents such as a stroke. I will look closely at the application of the standards to ensure that the improvements that Roz McCall seeks can be taken forward.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you.

I call Keith Brown for a point of order.

Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I am sure that you agree that it is very important that, in this chamber, we speak the truth. It is important for the benefit of the people in the gallery, for every member of this chamber, for the reputation of the Parliament and for the wider public—not least to try to stem the tide of misinformation and disinformation that we see all the time.

Today, Russell Findlay—[*Interruption.*] That is coming from those who have tried to speak against or shout down the truth.

During this parliamentary session, Russell Findlay has already had to apologise to the chamber for falsely accusing me of misleading the Parliament. Today, he sought to mislead the Parliament by stating that a majority of people in Scotland pay more tax than their counterparts in the rest of the UK, when, in fact, the truth is that a majority of people in Scotland pay less tax than people in the rest of the UK. We are all entitled to our own opinions, but we are not entitled to our own facts. In order to help to build trust in this place, can Mr Findlay be offered the opportunity, when he eventually returns to the chamber, to correct the record and apologise for misleading the Parliament?

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Brown. The content of members' contributions is not ordinarily a matter for the chair—it is generally a debating point.

That concludes First Minister's questions. Before the next item of business, which is a members' business debate in the name of Ariane Burgess, there will be a short suspension to allow people to leave the public gallery and the chamber.

12:48

Meeting suspended.

12:50

On resuming—

Rail Investment (Highlands)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): I encourage 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-18953, in the name of Ariane Burgess, on investing in rail to unlock the wealth and economic potential of the Highlands. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament believes that the Highland Main Line is a crucial transport link supporting tourism, freight transport and many vibrant communities; understands with concern that, despite this, two thirds of the 118-mile line, which it considers to be a critical route, remains single track and diesel operated, resulting in journey times that are reportedly similar to those from the Victorian era; believes that this results in frequent delays and causes limited capacity for passengers and freight; notes what it sees as the economic opportunities that can be offered by expanding and improving the nation's rail network, including connecting communities and boosting sustainable freight capacity to support major industries, such as the whisky and forestry sectors in the Highlands; considers that the work of the Highland Main Line Community Rail Partnership has been fantastic in improving the rail network by finding uses for redundant buildings and supporting passenger services; acknowledges the work of Network Rail in exploring additional passing loops, and notes the view that the line should be electrified and dualled to develop more reliable and environmentally sustainable rail transport for communities in the Highlands and neighbouring regions, as well as inter-city commuters and tourists visiting the north of mainland Scotland.

12:51

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): Every week when Parliament is sitting, I take the train from Inverness to Edinburgh, and every week I experience a journey that feels stuck in the past. It is slow, often overcrowded and punctuated by frustrating waits as the train stops in passing loops to let other services go by. A journey that should showcase modern, clean transport instead exposes how little has changed since the Victorian era. It is not good enough. That is why I am grateful to colleagues who supported my motion to allow this debate to take place, and to the Highland Main Line Community Rail Partnership, which has worked incredibly hard to push for an improved rail experience on the line.

The Highland main line should be the backbone of the north for people and businesses, but that Victorian railway is delivering Victorian-era journey times. For most of its 118 miles, it is still single track, and the trains that use it run on polluting

diesel. That means wasted minutes at every stop, unreliable timetables and a line that is unable to meet the needs of the people and the economy that it serves. It also produces more carbon emissions instead of cutting them. With anything that is almost 170 years old, there comes a point where change and renewal is needed. The evidence is clear that dualling and electrifying the line could cut journey times, improve reliability and reduce emissions, and it would be a game changer for our Highland communities.

In 2024, the central belt to Inverness rail routes created £87 million of economic benefit. That could grow significantly with an upgrade, meaning that any work would soon pay for itself. We could significantly scale up the current 15 passenger services a day. For communities in the strath, that would mean real commuting options, with frequent, reliable services to Inverness. For the wider Highlands, it would mean faster, cleaner connections to the central belt. In turn, that would improve wealth distribution, reducing its concentration in the central belt and spreading it along the main line to the thriving city of Inverness, into the Highlands and beyond. Likewise, instead of talking about Highland depopulation, we could see an increase in the number of people moving north. All of that would make Scotland's path to net zero emissions so much easier, while improving people's lives.

The economic opportunities from improving the main line cannot be ignored, either. Businesses need a resilient and modern freight artery that links Inverness and Perth to the rest of Scotland, as well as to England and Wales. We should be making it easier for companies to choose the climate-friendly option and move more of their goods by rail.

There is enthusiasm for doing so in industry circles. For example, a well-known supermarket already regularly uses the main line to move consumer goods. Imagine if major Scottish industries such as whisky and timber could also take advantage of an improved main line. It would mean fewer lorries on the A9, safer roads and lower carbon emissions.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind): Does Ariane Burgess agree that the situation could get even worse if the road is improved so that it is faster for freight and cars, while things stay the same for the railway?

Ariane Burgess: That is why I have brought the debate to the chamber. We really need to look at rail. There has been a lot of investment in roads over time, but not enough in the Highland main line.

Another big business sector in the Highlands that would benefit from an improved main line is

tourism. The sector contributes almost £11 billion to Scotland's economy, and we need to make it easier for tourists to get to the magical landscapes of the north and west. The Highland main line runs through the Cairngorms national park, and the Cairngorms National Park Authority has the ambition that 25 per cent of its visitors should be arriving by public transport. Rail must be the spine of that strategy, enabling visitors not only to arrive sustainably but to be based in one town and then travel to explore the park by public transport, including rail.

This is about more than dualling a line. It is about a vision for the Highlands in which rail is the backbone that connects our communities, supports our economy and delivers our climate ambitions. We cannot settle for a 19th century railway in the 21st century. As I stated in the motion for debate, Network Rail's work on passing loops must be acknowledged, but that work is picking at the low-hanging fruit. What rail users really need is much bigger change—namely, we need the Highland main line to be dualled and we need it, along with Scotland's other key rail routes, to be electrified. That would make a major difference.

Look at high speed 1 in south-east England. Trains on that dualled and electrified railway can Hoover up the 70 miles between London and the Channel in 45 minutes. Although the Highland main line route is a tougher landscape to navigate than that of HS1, trains could be sped up significantly, and a lot of capacity could be added if we dualled and electrified the line.

The Scottish Government has said that a journey time of two hours and 45 minutes is possible on the route and has previously promised the people of the Highlands faster rail, such as when it pledged in 2008 to shave 30 minutes off journey times on the main line. In the 17 years since, just four minutes have been saved. It is beyond time that the Government made good on that promise.

There are no official estimates for how much it would cost to dual and electrify the Highland main line, but I believe that there is a strong economic case to get the ball rolling and that the line would rapidly pay for itself.

Let us put our money where our mouth is and properly fund rail. Let us undertake scoping work and collect proper data on rail freight usage. Let us get spades in the ground. Colleagues, if we can find billions of pounds to dual the A9, we can surely invest in the Highland main line. The choice is clear: we can keep pouring money into roads and lock ourselves into higher emissions, or we can make a bold statement on rail to deliver cleaner air, safer roads and stronger communities. The Highlands deserve better. The people whom I

travel alongside every week deserve better. It is time to dual and electrify the Highland main line.

12:58

Jamie Hepburn (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP): I thank Ariane Burgess for securing the debate. I will start by saying something that is probably self-evident: I speak in the debate without much of a direct constituency interest—I see that Mr Leonard, too, is about to contribute, so I might not be alone in that regard. However, I am an enthusiast for rail travel; indeed, in recent weeks, I have become an even greater enthusiast for it. I freely concede that mine is a much shorter journey than the one that Ms Burgess has to undertake, but the railway is how I got to Edinburgh this morning and it is how I will get back home to Cumbernauld this evening.

I am an enthusiast not only for rail but for the part of the country that Ms Burgess has the privilege to represent. It is a wonderful part of our country and, more often than not, rail has been the mode of transport that I have used to get there. That has been for holidays—some of which I remember from my dim and distant childhood past and some of which have been taken more recently with my own family—or for work or, indeed, for the occasional party conference. I commend Inverness as a party-conference location and I hope that my party will return there at some point soon.

I recognise that the rail line that we are debating is a social and economic lifeline for the Highlands. In that sense, I have great sympathy for the improvements that Ariane Burgess suggests. They could create benefits by improving journey times and reliability and reducing emissions.

I reflect that there has been a significant amount of investment in rail infrastructure in the past couple of decades. That includes investment in the Stirling to Alloa line, which can be accessed by my constituents from Croy railway station and which was reopened in 2008—I recognise that that work was begun under the previous Administration—and in the Borders railway. My wife is a Borderer and that is another part of the country that I travel to regularly. There have been great benefits to the communities in the south of Scotland from that improvement, which has just had its 10th anniversary. The Levenmouth railway reopened last year, which will alleviate some of the pressure of commuter traffic from Fife.

That investment speaks to one of the challenges that the Government has had to face in relation to rail transport, which is to undo some of the savagery of the Beeching cuts of the 1960s. As Ms Burgess alluded to in her motion and addressed directly in her speech, the other great

challenge is that there have been decades of chronic underinvestment in our railways under previous United Kingdom Governments. That is the fact of the matter.

I understand Ms Burgess's point about Victorian infrastructure, and I reflect on that other great improvement, which relates directly to my constituency: the Edinburgh to Glasgow improvement programme, which electrified the line between our two main cities, and the Cumbernauld line, too. That programme electrified the line between our two main urban population centres; the line was constructed in 1842 but only, finally, electrified under this Government in 2016. I make that point to express sympathy for the necessity to consider further improvements on the Highland line and to underline the scale of the challenges. The challenges involved in improving our railways across the country are considerable, because of the decades-long underinvestment from which now, thankfully, under this Government, we are catching up.

I see that I have to close, Presiding Officer.

Another challenge on which we have to reflect is that there is significant pressure on capital budgets, which have become constrained for a variety of reasons, including the UK Government settlements and the pressures of inflation. We must be realistic and recognise that context.

All that said, I agree that on-going rail improvements across the country are important. I commend Ariane Burgess for securing the debate to make sure that the Parliament has the chance to consider how those might impact the Highlands, which she represents.

13:03

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I thank Ariane Burgess for securing the debate and, in particular, I welcome the framing of her motion and its focus on the role of rail in unlocking the economic potential of the Highlands. Maybe I should include the Islands in that, although I will not be calling at the moment for a rail bridge to Orkney—possibly to the Deputy Presiding Officer's disappointment—or for a new tracked crossing to Skye, with or without tolls.

The impact of rail services does not stop at the last set of buffers. It is felt in communities beyond the last mile of track. We should remember that the whole region could feel the benefit of improved rail infrastructure, whether that is about transporting freight or making it easier for visitors to get around. The benefits of connections do not start and stop at the station platform. The economic argument has real merit. The Highlands and Islands has—to resurrect a familiar phrase—

northern powerhouse potential waiting to be unlocked.

The Highlands has always been a region that has had to overcome the challenges of access. We should reflect on the incredible work and the driving ambition that gave us not only the Highland main line but the far north line, the west Highland line and the connection from Inverness to Aberdeen. Those enduring arteries were built in the 19th century, many of them by hand. Those thousands of hands lifted the Highlands out of isolation and, in many ways, built the base for the modern region and its economy that we see today. As others have said, previous generations have left us an incredible legacy.

However, as Ariane Burgess mentioned, it does not escape the notice of visitors that train travel often becomes a slog as you head northwards. The Victorian infrastructure may be sound, but it has largely escaped modernisation. I have been involved in campaigning on the dualling of the A9 road over the past two decades, and people have often talked to me about the dualling of the Highland main line, sometimes noting that the investment was going into road over rail. The truth is that our region needs investment in both, and that both are complementary. For example, in looking at freight, we must take a multimodal approach. Especially in the remote and rural parts of the region, road and rail must combine. If we turn our attention to the islands, we can add air and sea to the mix.

We should consider our rolling stock. Providing a comfortable space with areas to work and reliable wi-fi potentially offers more value to passengers than shaving 10, 20 or 30 minutes off journey times. We should also think about repurposing existing rolling stock. Some time ago, when Serco was running the sleeper service, I spoke to it about the potential to reuse the old, replaced sleeper carriages to provide an overnight link between the central belt and Thurso. That could—if it was still feasible—provide a new, lower-cost link to the far north and to Orkney by using the network at a time when it is underused. However, I am not proposing an either/or choice. Electrification, dualling, improving rolling stock and reducing emissions are all important interventions. Ultimately, the choices that are made will come down to effective management and prioritisation.

Of course, there have been improvements in relatively recent times, such as the changes that have opened up the Highland main line such that it is now a significant freight carrier, including the upgrading of the passing loop at Aviemore. Those changes are welcome, but the main line is still well short of what it should be—an economic spine for our region.

The motion recognises the work of the Highland Main Line Community Rail Partnership. I add my recognition of and thanks to the partnership, which has done a great deal to realise the potential of the line and its surroundings. Its grass-roots approach should serve as a model for communities across the country.

Rail will play a vital part in the economic approach to our region, and it has the potential to be transformative. We are only too aware of the important role that rail links have played in economic transition, and the Highlands and Islands should be no exception in that regard. There is real potential for improvement and for a genuinely ambitious approach. There are many small gains that we can realise quickly, and many larger-scale projects that should be advanced at pace. It is clear that there is a great deal of good will across the chamber towards improvements, and I hope that the Scottish Government takes note of that.

13:08

Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): I thank Ariane Burgess for leading this debate in Parliament, and I begin by reminding members of my voluntary register of interests as the convener of the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers Scottish parliamentary group, which Mr Hepburn would be very welcome to join.

It is in that capacity that I am reliably informed that, under the rail systems alliance Scotland control period 7, safety, infrastructure and engineering works are being carried out on the Highland main line after many years of neglect, but a debate of this importance does require us to be honest with the people that we are here to represent, and dualling the Highland main line, and even its full electrification, as I understand it, are not on the near horizon. Indeed, I am told that the cost of the structural engineering works required if the whole route was to be dualled would be extremely high, because the line has never been extensively dualled. But if we can dual roads like the A9, why can we not dual railways like the main line to the Highlands?

So, when Ariane Burgess harks back to the Victorian era, she has a point. As my old friend and comrade, trade unionist, rail enthusiast and historian Dave Watson told me, the 1861 act of Parliament that paved the way for the Highland main line's construction provided for only 7 miles of track to be dualled, near to Inverness. Later on, a further 7 miles were dualled near Perth, and then 23 miles of track were dualled near Blair Atholl between 1900 and 1909. But, of course, strictly speaking, that means that we go beyond the Victorian era into the Edwardian steam age.

The call for the electrification of this line in the motion, though, I believe is something that we should certainly pursue doggedly. As the RMT has said over and over again, electrification remains the most proven and effective method to decarbonise rail transport and to deliver faster journey times safely. That would benefit passengers, but it would also benefit freight, which is where we also need vision and ambition.

In my view, we have a highly centralised economy. We need greater decentralisation of industry and a greater diffusion of economic power. So boosting the Highland economy and electrifying this line, I believe, should be part of that, not least because every £1 million invested in rail generates £2.5 million-worth of value in the wider economy. We know that major exports from the Highlands and Islands, like whisky, shellfish, agricultural produce and timber, are nearly all transported at the moment on lorries, often on roads running alongside the Highland main line. If we are serious about getting traffic off our roads and on to our railways, we need to invest in rail and invest in electrification.

Finally, I am bound to say to the cabinet secretary that that goal of a shift from road to rail is not helped by the fact that train stations on this line—Dunkeld and Birnam, Blair Atholl, Dalwhinnie, Newtonmore and Carrbridge—are not currently staffed at all and that Pitlochry station, which is staffed, is now suffering a 10 per cent cut in ticket office opening hours, and Kingussie, on the Highland main line, is facing a cut in ticket office hours of 65 per cent. That is more than 27 hours a week when the ticket office is now closed when formerly it was open. In my view, this is diminishing passenger service, diminishing passenger safety and diminishing passenger accessibility.

So let us use the public ownership of the railway to invest in it, to invest in the infrastructure, to invest in safety, to invest in reliability, but to invest in the people who work on it, too.

13:12

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): I thank my colleague Ariane Burgess for lodging the motion. As we celebrate 200 years since the birth of the railways, it is a great time to look at that vision for Scotland's railways, and Ariane Burgess has laid out an exciting vision for the economy of the Highlands and for communities.

I welcome the fact that some small improvements that have been made to the Highland main line in Perthshire in my region. The £3 million upgrade of Dunkeld and Birnam station is very welcome, with extended platforms allowing

longer train services to stop, improvements in access by raising platforms and improvements to waiting areas. The partnership working with the community station group has been very positive.

However, all of the improvements that have been made so far have been about maintaining the railway; they are not game-changing investments that can deliver the real potential of the Highland main line. The work at Dunkeld and Birnam is only one step in the right direction; the station itself remains cut off from the community by the A9, and it needs to be fully reconnected. So far, the community's proposals to have the road enter a short underpass have been rejected. I am sure that, if Dunkeld and Birnam were in the Alps, the authorities would not think twice about making the road fit the landscape and the community, and it is disappointing that, after years of consultation, the proposals have been rejected, even though they would represent a tiny fraction of the total cost of the A9 dualling project.

The context of the A9 is important, and not just because it shares the same corridor as the Highland main line. The prioritisation of road over rail will be damaging unless there is a matching investment in the railway—an important point that has already been raised by John Mason. Dualling the A9 will result in an increase in car mileage at a time when the Government still has a commitment to bringing it down.

Moreover, the Government is now pointing to transport as a sector where even deeper cuts in carbon emissions will have to be made in the forthcoming climate change plan, and I am interested in hearing the cabinet secretary's view on how we start to square that circle. If it is to compete with the A9, the railway needs to be fully electrified from Dunblane through Perth to Inverness as soon as possible to deliver major benefits for passengers and freight.

Electric trains will reduce journey times. They accelerate faster, will climb Drumochter pass far quicker than diesel locos and will be able to haul heavier freight loads. We have already seen the major benefits of using class 93 electric trains to haul test freight on the west coast main line—it is now time to bring those advantages to industry in the Highlands.

Electrification will also enable more trains to run on the Highland main line, because faster running times on single lines between passing loops will allow more trains on the network. We can have better, faster, more frequent services with more capacity for people and freight, but only with full electrification.

I recognise the Government's priorities. Making progress on electrifying the Fife and Borders services is a priority, especially given that new

battery electric trains have been ordered and are on the way. After those projects are complete, we must shift the focus on to the Highland main line, partly because this is also about keeping railway engineering jobs in Scotland through a pipeline of electrification projects that can support young people joining the industry.

With electrification of the Highland main line agreed, the route could then be redesigned to maximise the benefits. New and altered crossing loops, double tracking and freight-specific enhancements could be planned to meet the needs of industry and passengers for generations to come. Reflecting on Richard Leonard's point, I would suggest a step-by-step process, with electrification coming first before we start looking at dualling and other enhancements.

In conclusion, the Highland main line is the key to unlocking the industrial potential of the Highlands. We must shift the focus to rail and invest in a line that is low-carbon and competitive, but that work really needs to start now.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We come to the final speaker in the open debate.

13:16

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (Ind): I welcome the opportunity to debate the rail services connecting the Highlands with the central belt. We all want improved services, and I have enjoyed listening to the contributions to today's debate, but postulating the situation as a choice between rail and road would be a profoundly wrong misconception. We must have decent, fair and safe road connections, something that is taken for granted in the central belt.

On Monday 15 September, two more people lost their lives on the A9. Our thoughts are with their families; those who lose loved ones in that way and before their time are devastated for ever. According to the Road Safety Foundation, death is three times more likely on single-carriageway roads than on dual carriageways and 10 times more likely than on motorways.

The cabinet secretary has heard me making those points time after time after time. I know that the debate is about railways, but many speakers have mentioned roads, and I hope that it is in order to ask the cabinet secretary to indicate, in her response, when this autumn the promised statement about funding will be made and when there will be confirmation of the details of the dualling. Industry sources have told me that it can be done earlier than the projected revised target date of 2035, and, with a capital budget of around £5 billion a year, there is no shortage of money to do it in that time.

One way in which there could be big improvements would be to increase the amount of rolling stock and improve its quality by increasing the number and comfort of carriages. I want to refer to a constituency complaint—a profoundly serious one—that I received recently and which I am pursuing with ScotRail, which has not yet replied even though I contacted the company on 22 September.

On Sunday 21 September, a party of brownies and guides numbering 60 in all was travelling back to Inverness from a trip to Dynamic Earth. They had booked seats but, when they got on the train, there were no reservations. My constituent wrote:

“by the time the girls got their suitcases on there was NO seats. the doors shut ... the girls were all standing. We managed to get some to sit on the floor as they were ... feeling faint due to the squashing. We were all standing but making the most of it - assuming folks would leave at Perth”.

However, that did not happen. Instead,

“LOADS of people pushed onto the train ... standing on girls, pushing them out of the way, one girl was almost pushed off the train and was grabbed by a leader ... it became terrifying and ... dangerous”.

Girls were physically sick and fainted, were

“asleep on the floor”

and

“were overheating, it was like a third world travel experience.”

I could go on. It is an outrageous example of a complete failure to provide a service.

I wrote personally to every executive at ScotRail—by snail mail, so that they could not deny that they had got the letters. I have not heard from any of them. They are all well paid; they have job titles whose functions seem to overlap. Goodness knows what they do.

I wanted to use my time, which is drawing to a close, to say that, in the short term, we must see a proper, fair and decent service—and that, certainly, an apology from the chief executive and chair of ScotRail is overdue.

13:21

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): I, too, thank Ariane Burgess for securing the debate, which, rightly, highlights the value of the Highland main line railway in contributing to the wealth and prosperity of the Highlands.

A variety of points have been made. I heard what Fergus Ewing said about the incident that he described. I am aware of it and have urged a rapid response, and I will ensure that ScotRail responds quickly to him and his constituents.

Ariane Burgess referred to the Victorian era. The quickest journey time from Inverness to Perth has reduced from three hours and 15 minutes in the late 19th century to two hours and three minutes in the present day.

Stations along that stretch of railway have a distinct charm and character. I give a special thanks, as others have done, to the Highland Main Line Community Rail Partnership for all its work in creating a welcoming environment for passengers who visit the Highlands. I am aware of the positive changes that it has made through various projects, including the installation of new signage at Pitlochry station to support wayfinding towards local amenities and cultural hubs, and the maintaining of historical assets along the line, such as the Dalwhinnie station clock and the Victorian semaphore signal at Pitlochry station, which have been restored.

There is currently a focus on investing in rail to unlock the economic potential of the Highlands. I understand that, and I am sure that my colleagues will want to join me in celebrating the investment that the Scottish Government has already made in unlocking that potential. In 2023, we opened a station at Inverness airport as part of our £42 million Scottish Government investment to increase capacity and strengthen resilience on the network. As well as providing a new, green means of accessing the airport for passengers and staff, the new station serves the Inverness airport business park and the growing new town of Tornagrain.

As Mark Ruskell pointed out, there have been improvements. Those include the £57 million phase 2 of the Highland main line enhancement programme, which was completed in March 2019, and the platform extensions that he mentioned.

This year, as we have heard, we have invested more than £3 million in improving access within Dunkeld and Birnam station for those with reduced mobility, which has facilitated wheelchair users to board and alight at that station for the first time.

Ariane Burgess stated that we should make things easier for freight, including timber. That point was also made by Richard Leonard. They might not be aware that, yesterday, I announced a £3 million Scottish Government investment to enable the construction of a new £11.2 million rail freight terminal at Dalcross. Over a 10-year period, that project is expected to result in the removal of more than 8.5 million lorry miles from Scotland's roads and more than 17 million from UK roads. That joint investment with West Fraser will help to reduce Scotland's transport emissions, reduce road congestion and improve air quality. It is only right that that should be celebrated, particularly during Scotland's climate week.

Supporting private investment is key to success, as the Highlands Spring rail freight terminal at Blackford has already demonstrated. That facility, which received £4.47 million of Scottish Government funding, will remove a minimum of 10 million lorry miles from Scottish roads in the first 10 years of its operation.

In the summer, we provided more than £345,000 to John G Russell to enable the company to purchase a reach stacker for the Needlefield facility at Inverness, allowing the continued loading and unloading, and movement, of supermarket goods. Again, that highlights the benefit of freight movement and shift.

I note that Highlands and Islands Enterprise has published research that explores regional transformation opportunities in the region. I have asked my officials to work with colleagues across the Scottish Government and partners in the renewables industry to consider opportunities for transport to support that work.

The Highland main line is a popular travel choice for tourists, as it provides a scenic gateway to the Highlands. We know that tourism is one of Scotland's most important industries, and getting more people to visit our rural communities will boost local economies and enable growth. Now that peak fares are gone for good, we have made travel across the Highlands more affordable and accessible for the people of Scotland and for our visitors.

I point out to Jamie Halcro Johnston, in response to his request for movement on procurement, that, last year, I commenced a procurement exercise to replace the high-speed trains that operate on the line. The replacement trains will provide reliability and resilience for the long-distance rail services that will sustain vital connections for communities and visitors to the north of Scotland, and they will present Scotland in an improved way.

I am proud that ScotRail is one of the highest-performing train operators in the UK. However, we know that it can perform better, not least on the Highland main line, which is why the Scottish Government continues to press our delivery partners to improve train punctuality and reliability across Scotland's railway. I fully welcome the opportunity to celebrate the importance of the Highland main line and recognise the central role that it plays in unlocking the economic potential of the Highlands—

Mark Ruskell: Will the cabinet secretary give way?

Fiona Hyslop: As I close my remarks, I give way briefly to Mr Ruskell.

Mark Ruskell: I would have liked the cabinet secretary to have reflected on the core theme of this debate, which is electrification. We have heard from a number of members that electrification can unlock the opportunities for freight and for passenger rail, and it can transform what the Highland main line does. Instead of having diesel locomotives chugging at 20mph up Drumochter pass, we can have something that is truly modern.

Will the cabinet secretary say a little more about where electrification of the Highland main line sits in the Government's wider programme of electrification and decarbonisation of the entire rail network? Are we going to get that?

Fiona Hyslop: Had Mr Ruskell not interrupted me, I would have come on to make remarks about the matters that he has just raised. With regard to unlocking the economic potential of the Highlands, we know not only that electrification and decarbonisation of the railways stimulates growth for those who use it, but that rail investment, in and of itself, helps to generate income through that spend.

Mr Ruskell will have heard—indeed, he referred to it in his own remarks—about the importance of the continued pipeline of decarbonisation. In Scotland, as we often hear from our colleagues south of the border, that provides much greater value for money for the Scottish Government with regard to the level of investment.

We have announced our investment for electrification and partial electrification in the Borders and in Fife. With regard to continuing decarbonisation, we will publish our decarbonisation refresh, which people are anticipating, because we need to complete the decarbonisation process. More information will be available when that refresh is published. Our climate change plan and our goals for 2045 require us to look at decarbonisation across many modes, and that is the appropriate place for us to set out those plans.

I am confident that the Government is taking steps to maintain the crucial transport links that are needed by growing rail freight in the region and investing in our passenger services to connect more communities and people with the Highlands, both now and into the future. In bringing the debate to the chamber, Ariane Burgess has presented us with a great opportunity to explore all those issues.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate.

13:29

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 or phone the official report on 0131 348 5447.



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