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Thursday 2 October 2025

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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 than people 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 cannot we 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.

14:30

On resuming—

Portfolio Question Time

Social Justice and Housing

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): Good afternoon. The next item of business is portfolio questions, and the portfolio this afternoon is social justice and housing. I remind members that questions 5 and 7 are grouped together. I will therefore take any supplementaries on those questions after both have been answered.

Devolved Benefits (Spending)

1. **Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what discussions the social justice secretary has had with ministerial colleagues regarding how to manage any growing funding gap created by higher spending on devolved benefits. (S6O-05018)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): I met the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government and the Minister for Public Finance in April to discuss the fiscal sustainability delivery plan and public service reform strategy, and more recently, in September, for a review of portfolio spending as part of the budget and spending review process. Discussions will continue between ministers as we work through the budget and spending review process during the coming months.

Craig Hoy: The minister might be holding meetings, but the meetings are not solving the problem, because the minister's complacency about the benefits black hole that she is creating is staggering and fiscally irresponsible.

We should not be surprised because, whether through the soaring number of highly paid public sector workers or the ballooning cost of benefits, this Government is surely and stealthily building a client state for electoral advantage. Is it not the case that it will be ordinary hard-working Scots who are already struggling to pay their bills who will pay for that reckless welfare spending through higher tax and poorer public services?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I wonder how Craig Hoy's statement would have gone down with the parents of disabled children and young people whom I met this morning. They talked about the fact that the support that they get from the Scottish Government through social security is an important part of the support that a society should be providing for people.

As Craig Hoy goes through his pre-written comments, I wonder whether there is another paragraph that tells us whether he is going to take money away from disabled people, people on low incomes, carers and the children and young people whom I met this morning.

That is where the disappointment comes, and it is where Craig Hoy and the Scottish Conservatives' true colours are shown. They have absolutely no sympathy for the fact that there are people in our society who are struggling. They have absolutely no compassion for disabled people, their carers or those on low incomes. That is telling to members in the chamber and to people throughout the country.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): Is the cabinet secretary in discussion with the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care about the creation of a neurodevelopmental pathway for adults? Many of them are economically inactive and are desperate to get the services that have been denied to them so far. That would not only help them to get back to work and reduce the dependency on benefits but ensure that we have economic growth where we desperately need it.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I am very happy to carry on the discussions about neurodevelopmental pathways for children, young people and adults. Mr Rennie is probably already aware of the fact that, very recently, I announced an employment and employability support programme for disabled people, which will be available across the country.

When I launched that service, I spoke to an autistic young person who had benefited from it. The importance of that service is revealed by what it gave them—with support, they were able to move from economic inactivity into a job in which they are thriving and in which the company is benefiting greatly from their skills. I am happy to pick up with the health secretary the issues that Mr Rennie mentions.

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): The Scottish Conservatives keep raising the topic of expenditure on benefits, but they continue to shy away from the question of whose benefits they would see cut.

I am proud that the Scottish National Party Government—unlike successive Westminster Governments—continues to prioritise the most vulnerable people in our society through higher social security spending. Will the cabinet secretary outline the impacts that that prioritisation is having on child poverty in Scotland?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Rona Mackay again gets to the nub of the issue. I can only presume—and Craig Hoy can feel free to continue to shout from a sedentary position if I am wrong—that part of the cuts that Mr Hoy wants would be to the Scottish child payment, which is forecast to keep

40,000 children out of relative poverty this year. Perhaps he would like us to keep the two-child benefit cap, rather than mitigating that, which is estimated to result in 20,000 fewer children living in poverty. We take very seriously our requirements to provide a robust system for social security, but I am also exceptionally proud of the support that we continue to give, particularly to young people.

Larger Families

2. **Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government, as part of the work of its ministerial population task force, what action it will undertake to support people to have larger families, should they want more children. (S6O-05019)

The Minister for Equalities (Kaukab Stewart): Our population strategy sets out our ambition that Scotland is the ideal place to raise a family, where people are enabled to have the number of children that they wish to have. It is not for Government to dictate or influence whether people should have children, which is, rightly, a matter for individuals. The ministerial population task force continues to consider fertility trends, and we are engaging with the United Kingdom Government on its parental leave and pay review to ensure that any new provision supports working families in Scotland.

Kenneth Gibson: Last year, Scotland's total fertility rate fell to 1.25, which is the lowest since records began in 1855. Given that a population needs a fertility rate of 2.1 just to remain constant, that demographic decline will have profound consequences for us all. Does the minister agree that that is an existential concern for Scotland? What policies does the Scottish Government believe can make a real difference in arresting and reversing that depressing trend? Please note that I am asking not about immigration but about the birth rate.

Kaukab Stewart: I share the member's interesting views on our changing demographics. Falling birth rates are a trend across many high-income countries, with, as the member said, significant implications for our economies, communities and public services. We are committed to learning from other countries. In December 2024, the ministerial population task force considered potential international lessons from family-friendly policy interventions.

We are currently exploring next steps in the Scottish context, including scoping further research into the role of parental leave uptake on decisions to have children. From our 2022 attitudes to family formation research, we know that childcare is an important factor in people's decision to have children. Through our addressing depopulation action plan, we are funding local authorities in depopulating areas in the Western Isles and in the north-west of the Highlands to scope and deliver, where possible, childcare interventions that support families to live and work there.

Social Security Scotland (Veterans Support)

3. **Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update regarding the work that Social Security Scotland is engaging in to support veterans in accessing its services. (S6O-05020)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): We welcome the Scottish Veterans Commissioner's report and the recommendation to improve access to devolved benefits for veterans. Social Security Scotland's chief executive recently met the commissioner to discuss shared priorities, including the report and how access could be improved in the Scottish social security system. The agency will work with the Scottish Government to provide a response to that report in due course.

In designing its processes, the Scottish Government is taking into account the views of veterans and Social Security Scotland trained staff to deliver person-centred support. Support for veterans is currently available within existing services without their having to go through a separate process.

Paul Sweeney: Last month's report by the Scottish Veterans Commissioner recommended that veterans who are accessing benefits through Social Security Scotland should be identified and supported by staff who are trained to be veteran aware and that veteran support needs to have a clear, designated point of contact. That recommendation was made even more urgent when last week's figures showed that 925 veterans in Scotland made a homelessness application in the past year. I am sure that the whole chamber agrees that that is not acceptable. Will the minister confirm that the Scottish Government will implement the Scottish Veterans Commissioner's recommendations in full and consider creating a veterans network in Social Security Scotland, so that veterans can get support from those who most understand their lived experience—other veterans?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The way in which the service is designed in Social Security Scotland means that it has already considered a range of interests and the needs of many seldom-heard groups such as veterans. It is important that Social Security Scotland staff are trained to deliver person-centred support right across the range of benefits that they now deliver, regardless of background or need, and that they provide tailored support for the individuals. That is why I reiterate

the point that the agency is working through the recommendations in that report to see what can be done to ensure that the service that is being provided is working for all, including our veterans.

That work will continue, and the work that the chief executive has already undertaken alongside the commissioner is part of that process of ensuring that we are delivering for all.

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): The Scottish Veterans Commissioner's annual report found that there was poor progress on preventing veterans' homelessness in 2023-24 and that there was incremental progress in 2025. What further work is the Scottish Government carrying out in conjunction with other public bodies to ensure that no veteran is forced to declare themselves homeless and that they can access benefits from Social Security Scotland?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I will begin with the actions that are being taken around devolved benefits. It is particularly important that we recognise that there are seldom-heard groups that find it difficult to access benefits—veterans are one of them, but they are not the only one. Many of those groups face shared challenges, so, if we can get the system right, we will be able to benefit not just veterans but others, too.

That is exactly why we are tackling areas such as the challenge that many people are not aware of the benefits that they are entitled to or are unaware of the support to enable people to apply for the benefits that they are entitled to. Social Security Scotland is unique in the United Kingdom in delivering local support to ensure that people get help in applying for their benefits.

I recognise that there is, as Alexander Stewart says, an obligation not just on the Government but on local authorities to provide services for our veterans to ensure that they are not homeless. That is very much the prevention part of the work that we continue to do, and I have to say, Presiding Officer, that it is therefore disappointing—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, cabinet secretary.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: —that the opportunities in the Housing (Scotland) Bill, which the Scottish Conservatives did not—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am keen to get a supplementary question in from Keith Brown.

Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP): It is essential that veterans receive the best support possible in recognition of the valuable contribution that they have made. The cabinet secretary may be aware of the campaign for fair compensation for veterans for hearing damage caused by defective ear defenders—an issue that I can attest to and that underlines the importance of ensuring that veterans can access the support that they are entitled to.

Will the cabinet secretary update members on the wider work that the Government is undertaking, in addition to what she has already said, with Social Security Scotland to reduce barriers to social security take-up, particularly for seldom-heard groups? Did the cabinet secretary see the "Good Morning Britain" report this morning, which showed that, when issues for veterans are created by the Ministry of Defence and the United Kingdom Government, there is no support for the Scottish Government in looking after the interests of veterans?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I did not see that report, but I will make sure that I am furnished with a copy of the transcript, to see what is going on there.

Keith Brown raises an important issue about ensuring that we all, and all our public services, have a responsibility to our veterans, which is why I will end the point about my disappointment that the Scottish Conservatives did not support our Housing (Scotland) Bill, which included an obligation on all our public services to respond to veterans' needs. It is disappointing that they did not take up that offer to help veterans and others.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 4 has been withdrawn.

RAAC (Tillicoultry)

5. **Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green):** To ask the Scottish Government when it last met with residents in Tillicoultry who were evacuated from their homes two years ago when reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete was discovered. (S6O-05022)

The Cabinet Secretary for Housing (Màiri McAllan): When residents are notified that their home may contain RAAC, it is the responsibility of individual local authorities to lead on providing advice and support to them.

Scottish Government officials have been in regular contact with all local authorities that have been impacted by RAAC to discuss progress. On 4 September, Clackmannanshire Council representatives attended the first meeting of a new RAAC in housing leadership group, which I convened and which I chair, to share best practice and expedite progress. Following my commitment to meet residents who have been affected by RAAC, my officials are in the process of agreeing an appropriate date to meet residents and Clackmannanshire Council.

Mark Ruskell: The owners of the flats in Tillicoultry feel bitterly let down by

Clackmannanshire Council, and it is very important that they are heard. They were given barely two hours' notice before they were evacuated from their homes by the council. In the two years since then, none of them have been allowed to re-enter their homes. Residents' remaining possessions will probably be bulldozed into the ground along with the flats. That is a brutal way to treat people who have lost their homes. What can the cabinet secretary do to help residents to get their remaining possessions back? Will the cabinet secretary join me in meeting residents in Tillicoultry?

Màiri McAllan: I will respond to the last part of Mark Ruskell's questions first: yes, I shall. My officials are currently in touch with campaigners to agree to a date.

On Mark Ruskell's question about possessions, there will be a safety issue when entering dangerous buildings, but local authorities would normally allow facilitated access. I would expect local authorities to keep those who have been affected up to date, provide them with advice and, where possible, facilitate access. I take away Mark Ruskell's points about residents' remaining possessions and will raise them with my officials. I will also ask that they be raised with Clackmannanshire Council.

RAAC (Tillicoultry)

7. **Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government when the housing secretary will meet with those constituents from Tillicoultry affected by reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete, following the commitment to do so that was made in early August. (S6O-05024)

The Cabinet Secretary for Housing (Màiri McAllan): As I mentioned in my response to Mark Ruskell, we met Clackmannanshire Council at the new RAAC in housing leadership group on 4 September and I am in dialogue with campaigners in Clackmannanshire to agree a date for me to meet them in situ. I understand that 19 November has been offered; I think that that date works for campaigners and I am waiting to see whether it works for the council.

Keith Brown: The issue goes beyond Clackmannanshire Council. As the cabinet secretary will be aware, the United Kingdom Government was aware of the risks of RAAC before devolution. Given the previous convention in many other areas for Westminster to cover pre-devolution legacy costs, is the cabinet secretary disappointed that the UK Government has not taken responsibility for RAAC and is making no contribution towards resolving the issue, which I agree is very important for my constituents in Tillicoultry?

Màiri McAllan: Yes, I think that it is essential that the UK Government comes to the table on RAAC, which is present in housing throughout the United Kingdom. As Keith Brown has set out, it is present in properties that were sold under the right to buy, which far predates devolution. Moreover, the UK Government is the only Government in the UK that has the financial flexibility to respond to unexpected costs. One of my first acts in post was to write to the former Deputy Prime Minister, who was formerly the housing secretary. Following the UK Government's unexpected reshuffle, I have written to the new Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government to make the case for a UK-wide fund and have set out my expectation that he addresses me on that.

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): RAAC was unforeseen and has been devastating for communities, not only in social housing. In Motherwell, we also lost our theatre and concert hall and it has affected local churches. I understand that the cabinet secretary is in contact with the UK Government but, given the scale of the problem and the constraints on the Scottish budget, is it not vital that the UK Government steps up to form some sort of RAAC remediation fund?

Màiri McAllan: It is. I reiterate that the presence of RAAC across the United Kingdom, coupled with the fact that the affected properties were largely sold under right to buy pre-devolution, alongside the UK Government's financial flexibilities, mean that it is the only Government across the United Kingdom that is in a position to offer a national remediation fund. As I said, the former Minister for Housing and I have made representations on that, and I will continue to do so. I also intend to use the newly convened RAAC in housing leadership group as a further attempt to bring the UK Government to the table to face up to its responsibilities.

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): RAAC remediation is a postcode lottery in Scotland. We have heard about the heartbreaking scenario of yet another group of home owners who are, sadly, going to lose their homes. I find that absolutely heartbreaking.

I do not agree with the idea that this is all on the UK Government. The Scottish Government can find money down the back of the sofa when it wants to, so why will it not back home owners in Scotland who are impacted by RAAC? I will ask the cabinet secretary what I have asked her before: will she finally confirm whether the Government will give financial assistance to home owners who are impacted by RAAC?

Màiri McAllan: I am afraid that Meghan Gallacher's characterisation of the way in which Governments set budgets and prudently spend

public money is completely inaccurate and reflective of a lack of understanding of how Government works in this country. I have set out the number of ways in which I am committed to supporting residents who are affected by RAAC, including meeting residents, convening meetings of leaders who are dealing with the issue, driving progress and trying to share best practice.

A practical point that I would put on the record, which is much more pragmatic than some of the nonsense that we have been hearing from the Conservatives today, is that a real issue that needs to be worked through is the availability of mortgages once RAAC at a property has been remediated and a green status provided to that property. I will be using the leadership group to try to work with UK Finance and the Chartered Institute of Insurers to reach a resolution on that important point.

Housing Emergency

6. **Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what the key barriers are to tackling Scotland's housing emergency. (S6O-05023)

The Cabinet Secretary for Housing (Màiri McAllan): The conditions that have led to Scotland's housing emergency reflect long-standing, complex and interconnected challenges. I have often characterised recent years as having been a perfect storm of failing economic conditions across the United Kingdom, driven not least by Brexit and inflationary pressures, coupled with the extraordinary pressures that have been bearing down on households over recent years. My colleague the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice has alluded to some of that this morning.

That has created a perfect storm of strain, but the combination of our housing emergency action plan, which was set out on 2 September, and the Housing (Scotland) Bill, which was passed on 30 September, responds to those challenges.

Alex Rowley: Even if we were able to tackle the economic and financial challenges—and I believe that we need to look at every option to do so—there would still be major housing issues.

I have read the Government's housing emergency action plan and, believe me, I want it to deliver. I welcome the fact that it talks about a whole-system approach. Does the cabinet secretary recognise, however, that a whole-system approach means that we need to address the major challenges in planning, which include the underresourcing and understaffing of planning services?

At the same time, we must address the skills shortages in the construction sector. Has the cabinet secretary looked at the document that Shelter Scotland published today on delivering an end to Scotland's housing crisis? It talks about the establishment of a new national housing and land agency that would centrally drive housing programmes in Scotland—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Cabinet secretary.

Alex Rowley: —while working with local authorities at the local level.

Màiri McAllan: I thank Alex Rowley for his question and for taking the time to read the emergency plan, which I deliberately kept short, sharp and action focused so that it was readily accessible. I thank him also for his party's support for the Housing (Scotland) Bill, which the Conservatives could not bring themselves to support, even though it is life-changing for people who face homelessness.

Mr Rowley is right. It is up to all of us—Government, Parliament and industry—to create the right conditions for growth and for confidence in an all-tenure approach to housing in Scotland. Through our plan, we provide multiannual funding certainty, coupled with increased funding and a growth target of 10 per cent per year. That is underpinned by action in planning to make it more efficient and to drive proportionality. I want to put on the record in particular the Scottish Government's creation of the planning hub, which is able to provide surge support to authorities, and our investment in recruiting more planners.

Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con): The cabinet secretary and I are both aware of a case where a developer is ready to put shovels in the ground, yet delays persist because paperwork has not been signed off. I have raised this in the chamber and I have written letters, while the developer, who, for nearly two months, has been ready to start on site, has also reached out, but with no conclusion. If this situation continues, investors will simply take their projects elsewhere. The Scottish Government might say that it is serious about house building, but can the cabinet secretary honestly say that that is matched by any action?

Màiri McAllan: As I have set out in response to a letter that Sharon Dowey wrote to me, I am not able to comment on the specifics of any planning application. Planning is a semi-judicial process and it is not for ministers to get involved with.

On the general point about proportionality and speed and making sure that planning facilitates development and does not hinder it, that is very much something that I am aware of. I have mentioned the planning hub and recruitment. Our action plan speaks to actions, too. I draw Ms Dowey's attention to the work that the planning minister and I have been doing in respect of

stalled sites. We are actively brokering relations between developers, planners and the Government to try to unlock those sites that have permission but are not moving forward.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can squeeze in question 8 if I have succinct questions and answers to match.

Aberdeen City Region Deal (Housing Infrastructure Fund)

8. **Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government how much of the £20 million housing infrastructure fund that was launched in 2016, as part of the 10-year Aberdeen city region deal, has been spent. (S6O-05025)

The Cabinet Secretary for Housing (Màiri McAllan): The housing infrastructure fund forms part of our affordable housing supply programme. A commitment was made in 2016, alongside the 10-year Aberdeen city region deal, that £20 million of infrastructure funding would be made available. The HIF enables funding for housing developments that have stalled or cannot proceed due to excessive costs or the nature of the infrastructure works that are needed. It is the responsibility of councils to bring forward eligible HIF projects. Neither Aberdeen City Council nor Aberdeenshire Council has submitted any projects that would meet the fund criteria.

Douglas Lumsden: First, I remind members of my entry in the register of members' interests, which shows that I was a councillor at Aberdeen City Council at the start of this parliamentary session.

While I was council leader at Aberdeen, we found it impossible to access that cash, which is why zero of it has been spent. Calls by my colleague Liam Kerr to use that £20 million pot to compensate reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete home owners in Torry, which I would have thought was a good solution, have fallen on deaf ears in this Scottish National Party Government. Will the cabinet secretary reach out to both Aberdeen City Council and Aberdeenshire Council to find ways for that money to be spent on housing before it is lost to the north-east?

Màiri McAllan: The housing infrastructure fund is well used throughout the country, so I do not recognise Douglas Lumsden's characterisation of it. He ought to catch up a little bit. Today, I have written to Aberdeen City Council to confirm that its request for £10 million to meet the cost of RAAC remediation does not meet the criteria of the housing infrastructure fund. I have instead invited the council to submit a proposal for additional grant support through the affordable housing supply programme for the equivalent amount. That will not only help the council to meet the cost of remediation from within its budgets but make a valuable contribution to Scotland's supply of affordable housing.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes portfolio question time. There will be a short pause before we move on to the next item of business, to allow front-bench teams to change positions, should they so wish.

Prison Population

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a statement by Angela Constance on Scotland's prison population. The cabinet secretary will take questions at the end of her statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

14:58

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs (Angela Constance): Since I became justice secretary, I have regularly updated members on the measures that have been taken to establish a sustainable prison population during a time of significant increase in numbers. That includes maximising the capacity of the prison estate, enacting the Prisoners (Early Release) (Scotland) Act 2025 and optimising the use of home detention curfew.

We have also built on our commitment to increasing the availability of community justice interventions—backed by an additional investment of £25 million—to £159 million this year. That reflects the evidence that alternatives to custody can, where appropriate, be more effective in reducing reoffending.

Although those measures have been essential to ease pressure on our prisons, the population has continued to rise. Today's population is 8,363, and we are on the cusp of having a record number of people in custody. Currently, 10 prisons are at red risk status, and 10 are at or over their assessed capacity tolerance. Prison is necessary, and it remains crucial that prisons house those who pose the greatest risk. The continuing rise in the prison population reflects, in part, the increase in convictions of those who have committed serious sexual offences and other crimes for which custody is the only appropriate response. That clearly demonstrates the important work that is undertaken by our justice bodies in effectively tackling crime and delivering justice. It is also vital that our prisons operate safely and effectively, by both protecting the public and providing the best possible environment to support the rehabilitation of those in custody, which is fundamental if we are to reduce reoffending.

The recent increases in the prison population are having a significant impact on those who live and work in our prisons. There is now a critical risk to the continued safe and effective operation of the estate, due to the pressured environment, and the Scottish Prison Service's ability to deliver rehabilitative regimes has been severely curtailed. Those views have been echoed by His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Prisons for Scotland. The Scottish Prison Service has confirmed that increases are compounded by the complexity of the population, with higher numbers of individuals involved in serious organised crime groups and the increasing numbers of individuals convicted of sexual offences.

In Scotland, we have a presumption against short sentences of a year or less, and, although there is a long-term trend away from such sentences, they continue to make up a notable proportion of sentences imposed. We are also seeing a sustained higher remand population, at around 25 per cent of the overall population, with 80 per cent of those on solemn charges. In addition, the Scottish Prison Service has reported an increase of 700 long-term prisoners compared to the figure on the same date in 2020, which equates to a prison the size of HMP Addiewell. That means that significant parts of the population will remain in the care of the Scottish Prison Service for longer, further impacting its ability to cope with any rise in population. These considerable changes in population, as well as the increase in numbers, have led to the Scottish Prison Service, the Prison Governors Association and other interested parties making representations to me about the urgent need to reduce the current population.

Today, I have laid secondary legislation to take necessary action. It is clear that we need to reduce the pressure on our prisons and on the officers, staff and wider professionals who play a vital role working in our Prison Service. I take this opportunity to put on record my gratitude to and appreciation of those staff, who continue, day in and day out, to carry out an outstanding job in very difficult circumstances. I seek the Parliament's approval to exercise the power under section 3C of the Prisoners and Criminal Proceedings (Scotland) Act 1993 to make regulations to enable the release of some prisoners early, if necessary and proportionate, in response to such an emergency situation. Given the level of pressure on our prisons and the upcoming fortnight-long recess, I ask that an expedited timetable be followed. Let me be clear to the Parliament: this is not an action that I propose lightly, but it is necessary, and I consider that the legal test has been met.

Public safety and protecting victims and their families are paramount. Therefore, in preparing the legislation, I have done my utmost to take account of the possible concerns. Those considered for early release would be limited to those serving sentences of less than four years who, on the date of their release, would be within 180 days of their original legal release date. Such releases under the scheme would also be subject to a veto, which could be applied by the governor in charge, where they considered that a prisoner posed an immediate risk of harm to an identified

person or group. In support of this, I have also laid secondary legislation today for a change in prison rules to ensure that such a task can be effectively delegated should that be necessary. In addition, no one who is serving a sentence for sexual offences or domestic abuse would be released. We will also engage victim support organisations, local authorities and other key partners in preparing for any releases.

There is no single solution to achieving a sustainable prison population, just as there is no single reason for the increases. That is why we are continuing to take forward a range of measures, some of which I outlined at the start of my statement. Other steps include increasing prison estate capacity through the new prisons in Inverness and Glasgow, while we are also seeing positive indicators through an increase in the use of bail supervision and the roll-out of electronically monitored bail across the country.

Shortly after the recess, I will bring forward secondary legislation to facilitate the earlier removal of prisoners who are liable for removal from the United Kingdom. Although returns and deportations are reserved to the UK Government, we can, through devolved powers, put the early release scheme to greater use. One measure that I will ask Parliament to approve is to change legislation to align arrangements for the release of foreign national offenders with release legislation in Scotland. That measure will propose changing the number of days before the point of release when a prisoner can be removed from prison for removal from the UK and it will change the minimum period of sentence served before a prisoner can be removed for the same purpose. Although that will not impact on many people, I think that that action should be taken.

In the slightly longer term, an independent sentencing and penal policy commission is considering how imprisonment and community-based interventions are used. The commission will report by the end of 2025, which will help to inform further action as part of the longer-term strategy for establishing a sustainable prison population while ensuring that justice is served.

This Government has demonstrated a clear commitment to reducing crime, prioritising victims and establishing a sustainable prison population. Recorded crime is down 39 per cent since 2006-07, yet we continue to see a rise in the prison population. That requires immediate action to ease pressure on our prisons, and emergency release is the primary option that is available to us. As well as protecting the public, we must ensure the safety and wellbeing of prison staff and those who are in custody, and our prisons must continue to function effectively to accommodate those who pose the greatest risk of harm.

I appreciate that members and the public will have legitimate concerns about my announcements. I have therefore published a briefing paper today to ensure that MSPs, victim support organisations and the wider public have the information that they need. In addition, I will invite justice spokespeople to meet me and the chief executive of the Scottish Prison Service to discuss the current situation, and I am willing to meet other members if they so wish.

In light of the intensely difficult circumstances that I have outlined today, I urge Parliament to recognise the critical situation that is before us and agree to take the necessary emergency action.

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

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): I say to the cabinet secretary that this Parliament recognises that our prisons are critically overcrowded, and we are well aware that it is this Government's failures both to get on top of crime rates and to build new capacity on time and on budget that are to blame. Twice before, I have stood right here and flagged that, without any strategic planning, any concrete solutions to the overcrowding or any meaningful work with third sector partners, emergency release is little more than a knee-jerk, panicked response to a situation that is entirely of this Government's making. I said that it potentially endangers the Scottish public and it would not work. The cabinet secretary did not agree, saying that early release

"will bring about a sustained reduction in the prison population".

The population is now higher than it was before, and this Government's projections show that our prisons will be dangerously over capacity, holding more than 8,500 prisoners by 2026.

How many prisoners will get out of jail and be back on Scotland's streets under the latest scheme? What strategic planning and genuine actions have been put in place since the previous opening of the gates that will mean that we will not be in this situation in early 2026?

Evidence shows that many of those who are released early are not ready for it and rapidly find themselves back in the justice system. What has the cabinet secretary done since the previous early release scheme to ensure that we are not setting people up to fail and putting the public at risk while doing so?

Angela Constance: Of course, it is often the Conservatives, with their rhetoric, who seem determined to set people up to fail. Let me assure Mr Kerr and the Parliament that there is a plan of continued action—Mr Kerr can call that a strategic plan if he wishes. I remind him that I have increased investment to increase capacity in community justice services, which is often opposed by the soft-touch rhetoric of the Conservatives. I have made efforts and will continue to make efforts to maximise the prison estate. Conservatives, among other members, voted against the Children (Care and Justice) (Scotland) Act 2024, which removed children from the estate, freeing up more spaces for adults. There are the new builds for HMP Highland and HMP Glasgow, but all that the Conservatives can do is complain about the cost of those.

Liam Kerr: They are over budget.

Angela Constance: There is also the new bail test, which has come into operation this year. Again, the Conservatives opposed the expansion of home detention curfew.

The Conservatives seem to be of the view that doing nothing is an option. Well, doing nothing is not an option right now, nor will it be in the future. It would be a welcome change if we could hear from the Conservatives what they are for, as opposed to what they are against, and whether they will stand with our Prison Service and our communities right now and do what is required to ensure that, when people leave prison, they return to their communities rehabilitated and in a fit state to lead a different life.

Liam Kerr should not confuse my words, because I have never said that early release is a permanent fix. [*Interruption*.] For the record, I have always said that it provides short-term relief.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Less commentary, please, Mr Kerr.

Angela Constance: The Prisoners (Early Release) (Scotland) Act 2025, which is the primary legislation that was passed last year, reduces the population by around 5 per cent from what it would otherwise be. On the numbers, I anticipate that, in the first three tranches, around 470 risk-assessed prisoners will be released, and thereafter, around 100 prisoners will be released each month, at the end of January, February, March and April.

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): Here we are again with the same failed scheme to release prisoners early that we were asked to agree to in March this year, with the same flaws and the same risks—and there were, indeed, risks. Notwithstanding the professionalism of the staff and management in the Scottish Prison Service, the prison system is in meltdown, remand is still through the roof, there is a lack of progression internally in the prison system and there is now only one open prison. Victims will be deeply disappointed that we are here again. Will we be back here in another six months? That is a legitimate question for Opposition parties to ask.

I have two further questions. First, what discussions has the cabinet secretary had with the UK Government about the release of foreign criminals who may require to be deported on release? That might not be a simple matter, depending on the country that they are returning to.

Secondly, the cabinet secretary has said that there is increased capacity, and there will be, but the new HMP Glasgow will not be built until 2028—it is over budget and overdue. It will have 1,344 prisoners. What will the target operating capacity be? Will it be the same as it is now? If so, I am concerned that the prison population will be extremely large if we use the same modelling as we do in HMP Barlinnie just now, which has a capacity of 900 but a prison population of 1,300.

Angela Constance: It is really important that justice spokespeople do not confuse the Prisoners (Early Release) (Scotland) Bill, which was enacted earlier this year, with emergency release, which was implemented last July.

That bill emulated action that was taken by the UK Government to permanently change the automatic release date for some short-term prisoners. It is very similar to what the UK Government has done, except that our scheme applies only to short-term prisoners, whereas the scheme in England also applies to the release of long-term prisoners at the 40 per cent point—as opposed to the 50 per cent point—in their sentence. The 2025 act gives sustained relief in relation to our prison population.

I accept—and I have always said it, every time that I have come here to propose action—that, on its own, early release is never enough. That is why we need to elevate the debate and look carefully at the recommendations of the sentencing and penal policy commission when they are published.

The levers that we have are fairly straightforward. They involve alternatives to remand and to custody, and the balance between the time that convicted prisoners spent in custody and the time that they spend under strict licence control.

Ms McNeill raises an important point in relation to foreign nationals. There is a complexity to that: the return of foreign nationals is entirely reserved, because it is based on international treaties. Where we have some scope is in relation to the devolved competence for the transfer of prisoners in the UK. I and my officials have reached out to the UK Government on that matter.

I am pleased that there is an acknowledgement, tacit or otherwise, that there is further action that we, collectively, as a Parliament and a country, must take in order to have a sustainable prison population. If the number of long-term prisoners is increasing, that requires decisions to be taken about prisoners who could be suitable for alternatives to custody.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, cabinet secretary.

Angela Constance: It is not right for Scotland to have one of the highest prison populations in western Europe. We should not be an outlier.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I have given a bit of latitude to the first two questions from front benchers, but we need to make more progress so that all the members who seek to ask a question get their shot at doing so. We will need succinct questions and succinct answers to match.

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): I note the cabinet secretary's comments about the increase in the number of long-term prisoners—she mentioned the figure of 700. Can she advise whether the Scottish Government is aware of any research that indicates an association between the length of sentences that are imposed in Scotland and the increase that we have seen in our prison population?

Angela Constance: Scottish Government information and data shows that a growing number, and proportion, of those in the prison population are serving longer sentences. In the decade up to 2022-23, the average length of custodial sentences increased by 31 per cent. In my statement, I said that the increase in the number of long-term prisoners compared with five years ago is 700 people. Given the 39 per cent decrease in recorded violent crime, that shows a change in the seriousness of cases. We have more long-term prisoners, who are each spending longer in prisons, and that requires decisions that are different from those that are taken in relation to some short-term prisoners.

Over the past year, we have seen a more rapid increase in the number of long-term prisoners, which means that we have to take decisions about short-term prisoners in order to ensure that, at the end of the day, our Prison Service is capable of housing those who pose the greatest risk.

Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con): For justice to be delivered, people need to serve their sentences and receive meaningful rehabilitation. Neither happens with early release.

The Bail and Release from Custody (Scotland) Act 2023 was intended to support reintegration and release and help to reduce reoffending, yet key provisions such as those in sections 12 and 13 have still not been implemented and the timescales are still being worked out. Given the pressures of prison overcrowding, when will clear implementation plans be set out and what engagement has the Government had with justice agencies to overcome any delays?

Angela Constance: For the sake of brevity, I point out that I gave very full answers to Ms Dowey and other colleagues at last week's meeting of the Criminal Justice Committee, when I gave an update on the plans to implement sections 12 and 13 in part 2 of the Bail and Release from Custody (Scotland) Act 2023 and on the aspects of that act that have been implemented.

The return-to-custody figure for prisoners who have been released under the Prisoners (Early Release) (Scotland) Act 2025 is 5 per cent, and the figure for prisoners who were released under the emergency early release programme that was undertaken last year is 13 per cent.

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): Is the cabinet secretary considering looking at establishing secure care accommodation for long-term prisoners, either within or outwith the current facilities, to free up spaces in the conventional prison estate?

Angela Constance: We have a programme for government commitment to explore models for the provision of alternative care in a secure setting for older prisoners and prisoners who have significant health and care problems. Careful consideration needs to be given to that issue, and I am having discussions with the Scottish Prison Service in that regard.

The member might be interested to know that, in relation to the new prisons in Glasgow and Inverness, very close consideration is being given to the changing demographic of the prison population and the social care needs of prisoners. For example, the new HMP Glasgow has been designed with national health service partners and with an emphasis on meeting health and social care needs. The design is based on the idea of having small communities, which makes it easier to manage different populations and to foster a sense of mutual support and cohesion. That is a model that we need to consider for the future.

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): How much of the infrastructure to increase home detention, bail supervision, electronic monitoring and, indeed, victim notification will be in place by the time of the proposed releases? Given the high remand population, can the cabinet secretary say whether there is any sign that the new bail test is working? In addition, can she provide data on the reoffending levels further to the most recent set of

releases? After the first set of releases, reoffending rates were very high, due to a lack of planning.

Angela Constance: The home detention curfew regulations will be implemented this month. That will be closely followed by the pilot on the use of GPS technology, which we are working on.

As the new bail test came into force only in May, it is too soon to say whether it has had an impact. Although there was a small downturn in the remand population over the summer, we are seeing an increase in the sentenced population and, in particular, in the number of prisoners who are serving long-term sentences.

We are putting additional investment into Upside, which for the first time is providing support to both remand and short-term prisoners—men and women—who are leaving custody. The Scottish Prison Service has published return-to-custody rates for the Prisoners (Early Release) (Scotland) Act 2025 and the emergency early release programme, which I referred to earlier. Those figures were 5 per cent and 13 per cent, respectively. The 5 per cent figure for the STP40 programme involved 17 individuals being returned to custody. That speaks to the strength of the release planning that has taken place, as part of which there has been a very sharp focus on the needs of short-term prisoners.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I make another plea for succinct questions and succinct answers.

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): The United Kingdom Labour Government expects to significantly reduce its high prison population through measures in its Sentencing Bill, which include changes to bail provisions, the suspending of sentences of less than a year and the reducing of the release point for prisoners to 33 per cent of their sentence. Given that around 600 prisoners a year are still given sentences of less than a year, despite the presumption against such sentences, and the change to a release point of 40 per cent of their sentence for some prisoners, has the cabinet secretary considered the introduction of similar measures?

Angela Constance: It is beholden on me to consider all pragmatic solutions. I have paid careful attention to the Gauke review and note that the UK Government is also emulating our presumption against short-term sentences. Although that has certainly had an impact in Scotland, the member is correct that, in the past few years, 600 people have been incarcerated on sentences of less than a year.

I have also met David Gauke and, as I said earlier, our sentencing and penal policy commission will report before the end of the year. That is considering how custodial and community sentences are used to ensure that the prison population is sustainable in the longer term.

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): I thank the cabinet secretary for her statement and for the useful conversations that we have had about the prison population in recent months. Any early release will clearly raise concerns for victims and survivors of crime, and indeed for wider society, especially with respect to reoffending. Has the Scottish Government or the Prison Service carried out any analysis of reoffending for those cohorts of prisoners, given our experience of previous early release programmes, including any lessons learned about what works to reduce reoffending?

Angela Constance: I recognise the impact that this announcement will have on victims and victims organisations. I want to emphasise a point that I did not make in my reply to Ms Clark. Those who are registered with the victim notification scheme will be informed automatically if their perpetrator is being released, but people do not have to be registered with the VNS to access information. I can provide members with information and phone numbers. Those who are not registered on the victim notification scheme have two routes. They can either contact the Scottish Prison Service directly or go through a victim support organisation such as Victim Support Scotland.

On the published reports that Ms Chapman is requesting, I advise her that SPS information showed that 61 people who were released as part of the emergency release programme in June and July last year had returned to custody before the date when they would originally have been liberated. That is 13 per cent of those who were released. On the tranche of releases that were undertaken in February and March this year, following the passing of the Prisoners (Early Release) (Scotland) Bill, 17 individuals returned to custody before the date when they would have been originally released. That is around 5 per cent.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, cabinet secretary. I will need to make progress. I repeat my request for brevity. Other members want to have their shot, and it is looking less likely that that will happen unless we get more succinct questions and answers.

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): The cabinet secretary will know from our discussion earlier this week that I share the alarm at the fact that we are once again discussing emergency releases, which the public might be forgiven for assuming are now part of the routine way of managing the prison population. I share her concern that the only way of dealing with that in the long term is a sustainable reduction in the

disproportionate levels of incarceration, and we cannot build our way out of that problem. However, given that prisons are at red risk status or over their assessed capacity, what update can the cabinet secretary give on the delays to the delivery of HMP Highland and HMP Glasgow?

Angela Constance: I agree with Mr McArthur's sentiment that, if we do not want to have to continue to take short-term decisions for short-term relief, we have to have the courage to follow the evidence, to be serious about building reform into the system and elevate the debate around that.

Progress is being made on HMP Inverness, which is good. It will more than double the capacity in comparison with what is already available in Inverness, and that is on track to be completed by next year. HMP Glasgow, which was impacted by Brexit and construction inflation, is also on course and is making good progress.

I agree with Mr McArthur that we have to modernise and update our infrastructure, but that does not, sadly, avoid the need to take emergency action now.

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): An increasing prison population brings an increasing cost for the public purse, both for extending the estate and, particularly, in resourcing staffing due to the increase in employer national insurance contributions and meeting rising food and energy costs. Will the cabinet secretary advise what increased costs are expected because of the recent rise in the prison population?

Angela Constance: A high prison population is costly because of the need to provide food, clothing and additional care, support and safety measures. The annual average cost per prisoner place in 2024-25 was £52,000 and the Scottish Prison Service estimates that pressure caused by the additional prison population will cost around £3.5 million this year.

The member has made the point about employer national insurance contributions, which I will not reiterate.

I have committed an additional £45 million to fund the Prison Service in this financial year, bringing the total investment to almost £0.5 billion. That is taxpayers' money. I emphasise that we cannot build our way out of this issue and that we must, as a Parliament and as a country, focus on long-term reform.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): In the light of the extra tranche of early release prisoners, my concern is for the organisations that support the victims of crime and for those that support prisoners before and after their release, helping them to integrate back into communities and preventing reoffending. Does the Scottish Government intend to offer extra support to those essential organisations, or will they just have to shoulder the burden of responsibility themselves?

Angela Constance: I inform the member of the increased investment in the new throughcare contract. I increased the investment in a project called Upside, which is a partnership of eight third sector organisations that now has capacity to support 2,700 people to return to the community. Prisoners begin that preparation about 12 weeks prior to their release and can continue receiving support for 12 months following release.

I am acutely aware of the member's point about victim support organisations and I assure him and Parliament that I will continue engaging very closely with Victim Support Scotland and other organisations to ensure that I support them as much as I can.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes questions on the statement. I apologise to the two members whom I was unable to call, but we are almost four minutes over the given time and I must protect the rest of the afternoon's business.

To allow those on the front benches to change positions, there will be a short pause before we move to the next item of business.

Dog Theft (Scotland) Bill: Stage 1

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-19121, in the name of Maurice Golden, on the Dog Theft (Scotland) Bill at stage 1. Members who wish to participate in the debate should press their request-to-speak buttons.

I call Maurice Golden, the member in charge of the bill, to speak to and move the motion.

15:33

Maurice Golden (North East Scotland) (Con): I thank my team, as well as the parliamentary clerks and the additional member in charge of the bill, Christine Grahame.

It is a privilege to stand here today on behalf of dog owners and dog lovers across Scotland, as well as for dogs themselves and for anyone who is passionate about animal welfare, the principles of justice and societal wellbeing.

The American naturalist and animal welfare campaigner Roger Caras said:

"Dogs are not our whole life, but they make our lives whole."

As any dog lover will attest, they most certainly do.

A dog is not an item; it is man's best friend, according to George Graham Vest. Dogs are valued and loved members of the family. They are loved by individuals, neighbourhoods and communities more widely. Losing a dog is heartbreaking and traumatic, whatever the circumstances. Losing a dog as a result of theft compounds that trauma. Stealing a family pet, whether for financial reward or any other reason, is a wicked act and should be treated accordingly by the law.

Currently, if a dog is stolen, the crime would be prosecuted under the common-law offence of theft, as with the theft of any other item, such as a bike, television or clock. That does not reflect the sentient nature of dogs, the emotional attachment between owner and dog, or the impact that the loss of a dog has on the wider family, nor does it reflect the pain and trauma that are experienced by the dog. That is why I and many others—including 97 per cent of respondents to my consultation—believe that the bill is both necessary and a priority.

There is precedent out there. At United Kingdom level, dog theft is now a stand-alone offence, as established by the Pet Abduction Act 2024. There are other cases of stand-alone statutory offences having been established in Scots law where an action is already illegal under common law. Most notable among those is the offence created by the Protection of Workers (Retail and Age-restricted Goods and Services) (Scotland) Act 2021, which was introduced as a member's bill in the previous parliamentary session and was piloted through the Parliament by Daniel Johnson. That act created the new stand-alone offence of assaulting, threatening or abusing retail workers while they are on duty.

I will go through each part of my bill in turn. It makes dog theft a specific statutory offence, with penalties of up to 12 months in prison under summary proceedings and five years under solemn proceedings, and/or a fine that can be up to the statutory maximum in summary proceedings or unlimited in solemn proceedings.

The bill provides for the ability of dog-theft victims to make a statement to the court telling of the impact and trauma of the loss of the dog. That will mean that they can tell the court about the full impact of the theft on them and on the dog. There have been wider developments in relation to victim statements, which I will cover in closing.

The bill provides for a statutory aggravation for the theft of an assistance dog. That means that people who rely on assistance dogs to help them to perform day-to-day tasks will have an additional layer of protection under the law.

The bill requires the Scottish Government to collect data on incidents of dog theft and to publish and lay that data before the Parliament through an annual report. It was clear in stage 1 evidence that better data needs to be collected on incidents of dog theft. I was pleased to hear that Police Scotland is already taking steps to do that. Collecting reliable data and reporting to Parliament on that data represents good public sector governance and ensures transparency.

My bill also requires the Scottish Government to review the act after five years and to report to the Parliament on its operation. That will allow our legislative successors to decide whether the act is working effectively and, if it is, to consider whether it would be appropriate to extend its provisions to other animals. I have always considered that the Scottish Parliament needs to get better at post-legislative scrutiny—my bill will embed that in this area.

I thank the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee for its excellent scrutiny and stage 1 report, all stakeholders who gave evidence to the committee and those who, earlier in the process, responded to the consultation on my bill proposal. I welcome the scrutiny that was provided by the lead committee, by the Delegated Powers and Law Reform Committee and by the Finance and Public Administration Committee. The lead committee's report is balanced, rigorous and fair. I am pleased by its unanimous support for the general principles

of the bill at stage 1, which shows that this is not a partisan issue.

I also welcome the committee's conclusion that

"a stand-alone, statutory offence would recognise that dogs are sentient beings and reflect the impact on animal welfare associated with their theft."

That affirms the case that stakeholders have been making for some years.

I also whole-heartedly welcome the committee's recommendations on the general principles of the bill. Moreover, I am giving consideration to further recommendations from the committee. I extend an open invitation not only to members of the committee but to the Scottish Government and the minister—we have had a series of productive meetings thus far—and stakeholders to help us refine the bill at stage 2, should it pass at stage 1 tonight.

I look forward to the debate and to addressing members' comments when I sum up.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees to the general principles of the Dog Theft (Scotland) Bill.

15:40

The Minister for Victims and Community Safety (Siobhian Brown): I thank Maurice Golden for his constructive engagement on the bill and the non-Government bills unit for all its continuing work on it. I also thank the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee for its stage 1 report and its recommendations, the vast majority of which I agree with.

As a dog lover and a dog owner myself, I recognise and understand the emotional impact that dogs have on our lives. Our dogs are members of our family and to lose a much-loved pet to theft is a harrowing experience. We are all aware that dog theft is an emotive issue that can have serious consequences for dogs and their owners. The Scottish Government is well aware of the impact on any owner who has had their dog stolen and, of course, we are also concerned about the wellbeing and welfare of the dogs that have been stolen. I am therefore pleased to say that the Scottish Government is able to support the key component of the bill, which is to make dog theft a statutory offence, as I confirmed to Mr Golden and to the committee earlier this week.

However, like the committee, I cannot agree with all the proposals in the bill. Therefore, the Scottish Government's support for the general principles of the bill is conditional on Mr Golden making changes to the bill at stage 2, to reflect concerns that have also been raised by the committee in its stage 1 report. If those changes are made, the Scottish Government will be content to support the bill at stage 3; given that the changes are also recommended in the committee's report, I am sure that Mr Golden will be responding to them anyway. I am pleased to confirm that the Scottish Government will be willing to provide support to help with amendments.

The bill also provides that the offence of dog theft will be aggravated if the dog that is taken is an assistance dog, regardless of whether the dog is working when it is stolen. The aggravation makes the charge more serious and ensures that the court is required to consider whether to make the sentence more severe. The report states:

"The Committee recognises that the theft of an assistance dog would have a serious, life-changing, impact on its owner, both in terms of the emotional distress it would bring and the impact on their independence and ability to perform everyday tasks."

The Scottish Government supports the aggravation and will engage with Mr Golden on how best to ensure that all dogs that provide support and assistance are recognised in the aggravation, reflecting an ask that was made in the committee's stage 1 report.

The bill provides for victim impact statements to be available for all dog-theft cases. We do not support that provision, and neither did the committee. Members will be aware that only two weeks ago we dealt with the Victims, Witnesses, and Justice Reform (Scotland) Bill, and we extended the use of victim impact statements to all solemn cases. We remain of the view that that is appropriate but that it should not be expanded to summary cases at this point. Therefore, our support for the bill is predicated on that aspect of the bill being removed.

I turn to the provision in the bill that would require Scottish ministers to prepare and publish annual reports on the operation of the act, covering extensive detail, including information that is unavailable or difficult to obtain, which makes it operationally impossible. More important, producing an annual report would present significant resourcing challenges that would be disproportionate to what such a report would provide. Although I am against the provision as it stands, I have offered Mr Golden support on developing a deliverable and appropriate reporting requirement, rather than a recurring annual statutory requirement.

There is also a provision requiring the Scottish Government to review the act. Committees of this Parliament are free to consider any post-legislative scrutiny. For a member's bill, I consider it appropriate for Parliament to decide on a review, not Government. Therefore, I do not support that provision.

I congratulate Mr Golden on his bill. I know that dog theft is a topic close to his heart, and I know that members across the chamber recognise, just as wider society does, the importance of dogs in our families. As we know, there is fierce competition among MSPs to win the Kennel Club's dog of the year competition every year. The bill recognises that it is not the monetary value of a stolen pet that matters to an owner, nor the breed or pedigree, but the loss of a family member to theft. By recognising the statutory offence that the bill will introduce, we all accept, as the committee does, that dogs are sentient beings, that their theft has an emotional impact on their owner and that there is also an impact on the welfare of the dog.

I look forward to continuing to work with Mr Golden to ensure that the necessary changes are made to the bill so that the Scottish Government's support for its general principles can lead to continued support at stage 3.

15:46

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): I am pleased to speak on behalf of the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee about our stage 1 scrutiny of Maurice Golden's Dog Theft (Scotland) Bill. Given the bill's focused scope and the 237 responses to Mr Golden's consultation, the committee agreed to a shortened stage 1 inquiry, without issuing a general call for views. Between March and May, we took evidence from key organisations, the Minister for Victims and Community Safety and, finally, Maurice Golden himself.

The bill proposes a statutory offence of dog theft, which reflects Maurice Golden's view that the common-law offence of theft does not adequately take into account the emotional significance of dogs as sentient beings. Organisations such as the Guide Dogs for the Blind Association, Dogs Trust and Scottish SPCA support that view, arguing that current law treats dogs as mere property. Further, Police Scotland agreed that the common law fails to reflect the emotional and welfare impacts on families and pets.

The committee supports the creation of a stand-alone offence that recognises dogs as sentient beings and acknowledges the emotional harm caused by their theft. Although Maurice Golden believes that a statutory offence would act as a deterrent, Police Scotland, the Crown Office and the minister do not believe that it would change how offences are investigated or prosecuted.

The committee also noted the absence of a dedicated awareness-raising budget, which we previously identified as crucial when considering Christine Grahame's bill. Without such an awareness-raising campaign, the deterrent effect is likely to be limited. We welcome the Scottish Government's expert advisory group on dog control and welfare, and have recommended that Maurice Golden explores awareness-raising opportunities if the bill progresses.

The committee is content with the three defences outlined in section 1(2) to 1(4). We also considered concerns about dog theft in the context of domestic abuse. Witnesses agreed that prosecutions under existing domestic abuse legislation are sufficient, and the committee concluded that further measures would fall outside the bill's scope. The penalties proposed in the bill align with those available under common law in the sheriff court but are lower than those that are available in the High Court.

Section 2 proposes that the theft of an assistance dog be treated as an aggravated offence. The committee recognises the serious, life-changing impact that such a theft would have on the owner, and the provision was strongly supported by witnesses, including the Guide Dogs for the Blind Association, which emphasised that such dogs are highly trained working animals that provide essential mobility support.

However, we noted that there have been no recorded cases of assistance dog theft in Scotland. Courts already consider the impact of crimes during sentencing, so it is unclear whether the provision is proportionate. If the bill progresses, we recommend reviewing the definition of an assistance dog to ensure that it includes all dogs that provide support and assistance, and we are content with the use of the negative procedure for any regulations related to that definition.

Although the theft of a working dog, such as a sheepdog, might not have the same life-changing impacts as the theft of an assistance dog, it can still cause emotional distress and disrupt livelihoods. Therefore, the committee recommends extending the aggravation to include other working dogs.

On victim statements, the committee notes that the court already considers the impact of crimes on victims during sentencing. Including victim statements specifically for dog thefts in summary courts could create inconsistencies, as they are not available for other offences. Given the Scottish Government's commitment to expanding victim statements more broadly, we recommend removing that provision at stage 2.

Sections 4 and 5 relate to reporting and data collection. Although the minister has stated that the provisions are unnecessary, stakeholders agree that current data on dog theft is inadequate and likely underrepresents the true scale of the

issue. However, due to how crimes are currently recorded under the Scottish crime recording standard, a statutory offence alone would not improve data collection, and the committee recommends amending the crime recording standards to improve data accuracy, regardless of whether the bill passes.

In summary, the committee supports the general principles of the Dog Theft (Scotland) Bill. We believe that it rightly recognises the emotional and welfare impacts of dog theft and supports the creation of a statutory offence. However, we have made several recommendations to improve the bill's effectiveness and proportionality, particularly around awareness raising, the definitions of assistance and working dogs, and the removal of the victim statement provision.

15:51

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate, and I congratulate my friend Maurice Golden on his dedication and commitment to highlighting this important issue, and on the work that he has done personally to advance it and keep it on the agenda. It is positive that the Scottish Government has given its qualified support to the bill and that it will hopefully find its place on the statute book before too long.

I am sure that we can all relate to the emotive issue of dog theft. With the Scottish Government estimating a dog population of between 800,000 and 1 million, it is safe to say that there will be many dog owners in this chamber. I regret to inform members that I am currently not one of them, but I hope that that might change soon.

I am always pleased to support events such as the Dogs Trust show here at Holyrood. Not only is it always a highlight of the parliamentary calendar, but it serves to promote the rehoming of dogs in its care. I am particularly proud to say that not only did my Dogs Trust dog, Buster, medal in that competition, but he was rehomed the very next week.

It is no great struggle to recognise the bond between people and their dogs. For many, they are part of the family. That was certainly the case with all our dogs, and I know the loss that I would have felt had any of them been stolen from us. I see that same bond in my friend's rescue dog, Billy—or Bilbo Doggins, as he is affectionately known. He swapped the mean streets of Bulgaria for a more comfortable life beside the sea outside Edinburgh. Despite his penchant for eating whatever has died or been washed up—or, indeed, been washed up dead—on their local beach, despite his appalling record on recall and despite his occasional, or perhaps incessant, barking, he is a very much loved part of the family, especially by the children.

That is why dog abduction is such an abhorrent crime, which rightly sickens not only dog owners but wider society. Too often, it is combined with other sorts of criminality; abducted dogs can face horrifying cruelty and neglect. Maurice Golden's bill proposes a significant change to how dog theft will be prosecuted.

The chief objection to the bill appears to relate to the merit of creating distinct offences to cover conduct that is already criminal. When making that objection, we should keep in mind that overlapping offences are far from uncommon and form an essential and long-standing part of our justice system. We use them to draw distinctions between action and intent, to indicate that a different punishment is intended and to lay down a marker to criminals that the focus of the law is on them.

As has been set out in much of the evidence presented on the bill, dogs are living, sentient beings. What is being done to them when they are stolen is categorically different from what is being done when a £20 note is stolen from somebody's purse or a watch is stolen from a wrist. The impact on the human is quite different, too. The gap that the dog leaves in someone's home and the not knowing where they are or how they are being treated should be reflected in how we address those offences.

The relatively new sentencing process guidelines from the Scottish Sentencing Council recognise a range of criteria for judges in choosing appropriate sentences. Harm is the most applicable, but also the most general. The Law Society of Scotland has taken a neutral view on the question, but points to sentimental value being part of the existing assessment of harm. That, too, is insufficient in recognising the true extent of harm in this case. Just as a dog is different from a stolen £20 note or a wristwatch, it is different from an old photograph or a piece of your grandmother's jewellery. Ultimately, it is for the Parliament, rather than the courts, to answer questions of value and the finer boundaries of criminal law and to reflect the views of society in doing so.

I note the Scottish Government's position on adding dog theft to the category of offences for which a victim statement could be made by the affected parties to the court under section 3 of the bill. Although I do not take issue with the Minister for Victims and Community Safety's explanation in her letter of 29 September to the committee convener, it is disappointing that the Scottish Government has not found a clear path to allowing this innovation. I have no doubt that, for offences of this type, victim statements would be a positive

step in highlighting and representing the harm that has been caused, ahead of sentencing decisions.

The bill is well deserving of support. In the best traditions of members' bills, it highlights an overlooked issue that is important to people beyond the walls of the Parliament and proposes action to deal with it. I am pleased that the Scottish Government has recognised that and has offered qualified support, and I hope that members will look to endorse the bill's general principles.

15:55

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): I acknowledge the work that Maurice Golden has put into the bill. Dog theft causes heartbreak for owners. Not only that, but it can be expensive to buy a dog—more so if the breed is fashionable, which makes the trade in dogs lucrative. Some might take a dog in the hope that a reward will be offered for its return or, more overtly, they might hold it for ransom. That causes real distress for owners and families. Pets are part of a household and their loss can be heartbreaking.

The Parliament has considered several bills about dogs and their welfare, and all have been lodged by members, which shows the level of our constituents' concern about the welfare of dogs. A comprehensive Government bill that looks at all aspects of dog ownership and related crime is required, and it should cover other family pets such as cats, which can also be bred in atrocious conditions to meet demand. Pets are often illegally imported, leading to animals becoming unwell and requiring treatment. Again, that is a welfare concern. The trade in pets is so lucrative that it often attracts organised crime, so it needs to be taken seriously.

Members' bills are, by their very nature, restrictive, and can deal only with single issues; hence, we are getting a patchwork approach to dog welfare. Although I commend those who have lodged bills, I think that we need a better approach to the issues that they seek to tackle. I know that the Scottish Government is setting up an advisory group on dog control and dog welfare, and I hope that that means that there will be better and more comprehensive legislation in the future and that the group does not become a talking shop.

Something that needs further scrutiny and clarity is one of the defences under the bill, because it does not cover dog theft within a relationship that has broken down. That is understandable, because, like any joint property in a relationship, ownership needs to be negotiated. However, concerns were expressed about a pet dog being used to further perpetrate domestic abuse. The theft of a dog by an abusive partner can cause distress, which can also be used to exercise control over the victim. Although we all agree that the bill cannot—and should not—deal with domestic abuse, it would be helpful if the minister could confirm that nothing in the bill would interfere with existing domestic abuse law and that coercive control is already covered in existing legislation.

The bill introduces the aggravation of the theft of an assistance dog. That is extremely rare, but it is right that the bill recognises the impact of such a crime. However, the Government, in its response, refuses to consider other situations where such an aggravation might also be useful. That is unfortunate, because dogs are used to provide assistance in other ways. For example, the police use dogs, as do search and rescue services. Additionally, sheepdogs can be very expensive to buy and train and are essential to farmers and crofters and the welfare of their animals. Decisions on adding aggravations need further consideration, and we welcome the ability to add them under the bill.

This bill is limited, as are all members' bills, but we believe that, accompanied by awareness-raising work, it can shine a light on the heartbreak caused by the theft of a dog. It will also give the police another tool in their armoury to deal with organised crime. Therefore, we will support the bill at stage 1.

16:00

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): I acknowledge the hard work and effort that Maurice Golden, his team and stakeholders have put into getting the bill to this stage. It is not to be underestimated.

Animal charities have spent many years calling for dog theft to be a specific offence in Scotland, because the current legal framework is felt to be inadequate. As we have heard, the current framework classes pets merely as property, which means that the theft of a pet has the same legal standing as the theft of personal property, such as a phone or a television. However, the theft of a pet is a fundamentally different crime, because pets are members of our families. Although the theft of a TV is distressing, it does not come with the same feelings of anxiety or grief that are felt with the theft of a beloved pet.

There is an even more significant impact if assistance dogs are stolen, as that can have a life-altering impact on those who rely on them, and that potential for heightened harm is not accounted for in the current law. The Greens therefore support the proposal in the bill to make the theft of an assistance dog an aggravated offence, which will reflect the more serious impact that that has on the owner. To ensure that that

specific principle covers all dogs who provide assistance and support, we agree that a relevant amendment should be lodged at stage 2, as outlined by the minister in her most recent correspondence with the committee. I look forward to that amendment being lodged and to other amendments that would widen the definition further to other working dogs.

As the Dogs Trust highlights, the current legal framework disregards the sentience of dogs and the importance of the human-canine bond. It puts a greater emphasis on financial value than on the emotional value of dogs—it treats them merely as commodities. With only one in five dogs reported stolen being returned to their families, and a chronic underreporting of dog thefts, it is clear that there is a case for change through legislation.

Although the bill is rooted in good intentions, and the Greens are content to support its general principles at stage 1, some areas should be addressed as it progresses. In particular, we note that, currently, dog theft is covered in common law. Although we know that it is not a perfect system, we need to be absolutely clear that the bill will make a tangible difference. In the committee, witnesses repeatedly expressed the view that a stand-alone statutory offence would not necessarily be an effective deterrent to dog theft in Scotland, as the proposed penalties are similar to those that are already outlined in common law.

South of the border, since the introduction of the Pet Abduction Act 2024, the number of dogs reported stolen has dropped by 21 per cent, although whether that is a direct result of the bill is unclear, especially when we factor in the data collection issues around dog theft.

If the intention of the Parliament is to align with the 2024 act, the bill needs to be broadened to include cats and other animals that are typically kept as pets. Charities including Cats Protection and Blue Cross have called for that. The bonds between owners and their pet cats and the feelings of anxiety and distress if they are stolen are not different from those of dog owners, and they also deserve access to justice if they are victims of theft.

I am aware that a number of other members' bills in this session of Parliament relate to dogs. With hindsight, it might have been better if, as Rhoda Grant outlined, the Government had introduced a consolidating bill to bring together different aspects of animal law. However, we are where we are.

In the months to come, I hope that a shared legacy of members in this session will be a significant improvement in the lives of dogs in Scotland, and I hope that the bill can play a part in that.

16:04

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): I congratulate my colleague on his persistence in bringing forward the bill—I know what it takes.

We have come a long way from when we, as the highest animal species, failed to recognise that animals are sentient beings, although dogs throughout the centuries could attest to the fact that the similarity between the words "dog" and "friend" is by no means an accident.

My late Irish setter, Roostie, was my best comfort when times were tough. She taught my sons much about being respectful to animals and, as she toasted herself by the fire, she let them use her as a pillow. I miss her to this day.

I note that the bill has been introduced in the context of a rise in the levels of dog theft since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, when demand far outstretched supply and there was growing evidence of systematic dog theft through organised crime. I thoroughly agree with dog theft being a stand-alone offence and, indeed, with there being a statutory aggravation if the theft is of an assistance dog, although I would include working dogs in that, and I note that the committee was of the same view.

I met the issue about the definition of working dogs during the passage of the Welfare of Dogs (Scotland) Bill, but I am certain that that issue is not insurmountable, because we all know a working dog when we see one. I notice that the purpose of the bill is, inter alia,

"to create an offence of dog theft"

and

"to provide for a statutory aggravation of that offence".

There is nothing to prohibit the inclusion of working dogs in that purpose. I was minded to propose that at stage 2, but I think that other members will do so before I get to the starting gate. I remind members that, if that requires additional evidence, that can be taken at stage 2. It would mean adding a new section, but, as I have said, it would be competent within the purpose of the bill.

We know what a pet dog is, we know what an assistance dog is and we should know what a working dog is. Those are dogs that are bred and trained for a specific purpose and that perform tasks to assist humans in various roles. They possess key traits, such as intelligence, loyalty and alertness. They require consistent training and care to thrive in their roles. They include sheep dogs, sniffer dogs for drugs and explosives, cadaver dogs to detect buried corpses, and dogs that are trained to locate the living. Although they have an added value, for reasons that members

will understand, I suspect that stealing a police dog might be a bit of a challenge for a thief.

Finlay Carson: Given Ms Grahame's experience of dog legislation, why does she believe that the Government is reluctant for working dogs to be included in the bill?

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

Christine Grahame: It is up to us to persuade the Government. I am sure that, between us and the member in charge of the bill, we might make progress. I just put that down as a marker. I have no problems with that, because I am retiring next year—I am free.

However, like the committee, I do not support the requirement for a victim statement about the effect of the crime on the victim. Such statements are not mandatory in other theft offences, but the court has the flexibility and discretion to permit a victim statement. I like the word "discretion" in relation to court.

I do not support annual reporting. It is the province of parliamentary committees to make space for post-legislative scrutiny. There has been an argument for a long time that we should have a committee that simply does post-legislative scrutiny.

I support the theft of a dog or puppy being recorded by the police as a specific category of offence. Facts give us power.

Again, I congratulate Mr Golden and wish him well as the bill moves—as I am sure it will—to stage 2, where I might well meet him and some others. It appears that there will be a crowded field.

I support the bill's general principles. I note other comments that have been made. We need a consolidating bill that takes in all the dog welfare legislation that we have made. There is nothing worse for a lawyer—I am a former lawyer—than having to pick our way through separate little bits of legislation. Let us have a consolidation bill in the next session of Parliament.

16:08

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): What strange conversations we have when we are discussing a bill involving furry creatures—Jamie Halcro Johnston has just shown me a picture of his black cat, Squeaky Biscuit.

My brother's dog is a rescue dog from Ukraine. It is much loved but paranoid and very anxious. I have two dogs: Pippa and Alfie. In fact, Alfie is dead, and I have Olly now. [*Interruption*.] I know—it is horrible when you lose a dog. My two dogs are pretty unruly. We live in the countryside and, when I take them on an urban walk and they misbehave, I say that they are rescue dogs, like my brother's dog from Ukraine, but I am working on their behaviour.

I want to bring members back to the concept of returning home to find that your dogs are no longer there. When I arrive home, I know that my dogs are there, because, when I drive around the corner of the house, they are barking. To me, that is reassuring. When I turn the key, they are there and they are excited. They give me a warm, unfettered welcome, and it is lovely.

That was not the case for my constituents Georgie and Eddie Bell and their two daughters. In 2018, their dogs were stolen. They were two lovely Border terriers, who, if I remember rightly, were called Beetle and Ruby. Georgie and Eddie launched a campaign with lots of posters around the Borders, offering a reward, and Georgie posted daily blogs. They were totally beloved dogs. The family had a bit of a setback because, a couple of months after the disappearance of Ruby and Beetle, they had a mystery call from a gentleman from Galway in Ireland, who said that he had the dogs. Sadly, it was a hoax and an attempt at extortion. That was desperately upsetting, because the family were left heartbroken once again. Many years on, the family still hold on to the belief that their dogs will be returned. Ruby and Beetle would now be 12 and nine.

Why does Maurice Golden's bill matter? Stealing a dog is treated in the same way as stealing a handbag or, as Jamie Halcro Johnston said, stealing £20. However, a dog is not like other material possessions; it is not an inanimate object. Although a handbag might bring joy to some people, a dog brings loyalty, companionship and, for many, independence, security and safety. Working dogs also bring an income.

Pet theft is on the rise—we have talked about that in the past. During the pandemic, there was a rise in demand for puppies. The law fails to consider the emotional value of a dog and does not do enough to collect accurate data, support owners, deter thieves or put victims at the heart of things by dealing with the trauma that they go through.

Gathering accurate data will absolutely—100 per cent—give a clearer picture of the problem. Proper reporting is also very important, as is a review of how the law is working. Furthermore, the bill makes dog theft a specific criminal offence, with penalties of up to five years in prison, as we have heard, which will send a clear message to criminals, even though some people have said that we already have a stand-alone offence. The bill has overwhelming support from the majority of

animal charities and the police. The Law Society of Scotland was slightly sceptical about it, but it remained neutral on it.

The bill is about protection, victims and justice. It is about love, family and protecting our loved ones. I urge everyone to support it.

Finally, we should amend the bill so that it explicitly refers to working gun dogs, as requested by the British Association for Shooting and Conservation, because it is important that we strengthen that part of the bill.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Ms Hamilton. I feel confident that Jamie Halcro Johnston will not be sharing any further pet details with you in the future.

16:13

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): First, I congratulate Maurice Golden on getting his member's bill this far. I know the hard work that it takes for a member and their team—dinnae forget the team—to research, create and implement new legislation and to work with the attentive and supportive non-Government bills unit team. In the previous parliamentary session, I lodged a member's bill to update the 73-year-old livestock-worrying legislation, to increase the penalties and protections on behalf of farmers whose livestock are chased, attacked or killed by out-of-control dogs. Again, well done, Mr Golden.

I am a member of the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee, and I took part in the scrutiny of the bill at stage 1. I will be brief and will focus my comments on working dogs and data. There is an argument that dogs need statutory and separate recognition under the law. Stealing someone's guide dog is not the same as stealing a television, and I agree with members about the emotional distress caused by theft and about the sentience of their animals. I have two border collies, Meg and Maya. Both are now 13 years old and still amazing and great company. Maya won the first Holyrood dog of the year competition, in 2017, when she was just four.

Working dogs are highly trained dogs, and these animals are also part of the emotional attachments of their owners and families. If members picked any farmer or crofter out of the tens of thousands and asked how important their dog is to their day-to-day work on the farm, they would hear why the proposals should, at the very least, be considered. Farm dogs have a unique dual role: they are there to help farmers with their livestock, but they are also part of the family and a source of companionship in a job that often involves long periods of solitude and remoteness.

I note that the Scottish Government has indicated scepticism about the provisions on working dogs in the bill, but I am keen to hear feedback from the member in charge or the Government on whether the issue is the complexity of the ownership of working dogs or something else. If the general principles of the bill are agreed to today, I would like to engage in more discussions about that during stage 2.

I would also like more clarity on the resource implications for the police and judicial services. There will be an increase in the burdens of record keeping, data analysis and storage, reporting, and training for those who are involved in implementing the new law, and we should see an estimate of the bottom line before we commit to the legislation. If we are to have a specific offence of dog theft in statute, I want our public services to have the time and resources that they will need to investigate and prosecute offenders.

It was interesting to hear about the current data collection practices, which are reflected in the committee's stage 1 report. Paragraph 96 of the report notes that the policy memorandum highlights that

"there is currently no requirement for incidences, charges, prosecutions and convictions to be recorded specifically as 'dog theft'",

with the result that

"there is no reliable data on the extent of dog theft."

The general view that was expressed by stakeholders is that it would be helpful if provisions in the bill improved the type of data that is collected, including data relating to any trends regarding specific breeds that are stolen.

In its submission to the committee, Police Scotland stated:

"The introduction of a standalone statutory offence of Dog Theft would not enhance accuracy of crime recording as the theft may be committed in commission of another crime",

such as housebreaking. In that case, it would be

"recorded as Robbery or Theft by Housebreaking as opposed to dog theft."

If the member's bill is passed, the Scottish crime recording standard will need to be amended. However, the committee recommends that, even if the bill does not proceed, amending the crime recording standard would enable better collection of data on dog theft.

I am conscious of the time, Presiding Officer, so I will conclude. I will support the general principles of the bill at decision time this evening.

16:17

Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): I am pleased to speak in support of the principles contained in the Dog Theft (Scotland) Bill, and I commend Maurice Golden for bringing it to this stage. This is a bill that I view not as a matter of crime and punishment, but as a matter of compassion and decency.

I have come to dog sharing and companionship quite late in life, and it has come about as a result of sadness and loss rather than by design. But, through it, I have learned much of joy and of hope, of humility and responsibility, and I have gained an understanding of our interdependency and have shared the blessing of unconditional loyalty and love, as well as being required to find out what the world looks like on a dog walk at half past 5 every morning.

For me, this bill is about human rights and our physical and mental wellbeing, but it is also about animal rights and animal welfare. It is about encouraging the better side of human nature, which is precisely what this Parliament should always be about.

So today, we are being asked to make a political decision, and in due course we may be asked to pass a law based not on expediency or short-term popularity but on values and principles. We know that this bill will not end dog theft—it will not solve every problem—but the people who elect us need to be heard, and they need to be listened to, and they are telling us that they want us to act. The creation of the statutory offences is backed by the Dogs Trust, the Scottish SPCA, Guide Dogs for the Blind and Blue Cross, which is in Parliament this week. We need to be clear, as well, that we are not pioneers here—that we are in the slipstream of others—and that means that we need to have the grace to learn lessons from those who have gone before us.

So, I remain open minded about whether or not the terms of the legislation should be limited to dogs. Dogs are sentient beings. They are not kept property, as the existing common law covering dog theft would have it.

Christine Grahame: Unfortunately for Richard Leonard, we have to look at the purpose of the bill. It is about dogs, so I am afraid that he cannot introduce another lot of animals—that would not be competent.

Richard Leonard: Well, I have just said that we also need to listen to our constituents and what they are telling us. We can deal with that matter at stage 2, perhaps.

The point that I am trying to make is that dogs are not kept property; they are sentient beings. They know when their routines are disrupted, when their lives are turned upside down and when they are no longer with the people who love and care for them, but I am open to persuasion that that might be applied to other animals, too.

I hope that the bill will also give consideration to something that I have raised in Parliament before, and that is the stress, anxiety, injury and cost when there is an attack on one dog by another, as is raised in petition PE1892 by my constituent Evelyn Baginski.

It is already an aggravating factor if any dog theft is part of organised crime, so I can also see the case that has been made in this bill by Maurice Golden for making it an aggravated offence if an assistance dog is deliberately targeted.

I also believe that a victim impact statement would undoubtedly assist those in our justice system charged with determining how to respond proportionately to the real effect—not least emotionally, physically and mentally—of dog abduction or theft.

But I do remain to be convinced about some of the lengthy custodial sentences that are floated as options in this bill. A change in the law will require to be resourced if it is to be enforceable. We will need good data—so, proper reporting and recording as well—and we will need to keep the bill's effectiveness under review, but these, in my opinion, should all be a routine part of what this Parliament does with all the legislation that it passes.

The loss of a dog under any circumstances is unconscionable and unbearable. The loss of a dog through a deliberate act of theft is unconscionable and unacceptable, and we should simply not tolerate it. That is why today I will be voting in favour of this bill at stage 1.

16:22

Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): I am speaking in support of the general principles of Maurice Golden's Dog Theft (Scotland) Bill. In doing so, I will focus my remarks on whether to include an aggravator when a dog is weaponised as part of a broader pattern of coercive control in cases of domestic abuse.

Having worked for Scottish Women's Aid, supporting survivors of domestic abuse, I have long advocated for a trauma-informed approach to justice and policy making. It is through that lens that I urge us to consider the lived experience of survivors—in particular, women and children—who have been subjected to domestic abuse in which the family pet has become another tool of manipulation, fear and control.

We know from survivor testimony and from research that has been conducted by

organisations such as the Dogs Trust, through its freedom project, that pets are often used by abusers to exert power and control. In my previous work, I saw harrowing examples of beloved animals being stolen or harmed, with abusers threatening to kill or get rid of a pet unless a woman returned home, or even using the custody of a dog as leverage in post-separation abuse. One survivor described to me how her partner would remove her dog from the house for days at a time when she tried to leave, only returning it when she complied. That is not just theft or cruelty but a continuation of abuse, and it must be recognised as such in law.

Thankfully, the Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Act 2018 recognised the pernicious nature of coercive control and set it out as an aggravator in domestic abuse prosecutions. However, there is currently no specific data available in Scotland for the number of prosecutions combining domestic abuse coercive control with actions against a pet. Although coercive control is now finally a crime under the 2018 act and animal welfare laws can address cruelty, there is no specific legal offence or statistical category that links the two aspects together, making it difficult to track such prosecutions. The legal system does not currently collect data that cross-references domestic abuse charges with instances of animal abuse. Perpetrators can be prosecuted for separate offences, but we have no understanding of how many perpetrators have been prosecuted specifically for harming a pet to further their abuse of the survivor and of any children involved.

Please believe me when I say that I have witnessed far too many occasions on which a woman has had to leave the safety of refuge to return to her abuser, with her children, due to his treatment of the family dog and the desperate pleas from her children. I urge the bill's proposer and the Scottish Government to consider an aggravation for offences committed in the context of domestic abuse or the explicit linking up of those two offences, which are currently separate. That would signal that our legal system recognises the full range of abusive behaviours and that it will not ignore the suffering that is caused to the animal's owner and the pet itself by the theft, harm or manipulation of a companion animal.

I take on board what my colleague Christine Grahame said about the purpose of the bill, but I also want to raise a concern, voiced clearly and compassionately by Cats Protection, which rightly pointed out that cats must not be forgotten in our legislative response. Cats, like dogs, are deeply loved members of households, and they, too, are used in coercive contexts. They, too, are stolen, harmed or used to manipulate. Although the bill focuses on dogs, it is important that any aggravator related to domestic abuse must be species neutral. Abuse does not discriminate, and neither should the law.

Let this bill, through careful scrutiny and amendment, reflect the lived realities of those facing abuse. Let it say clearly that you cannot use someone's animal against them and expect the law to look away. I would be devastated if someone stole my wee black and tan Jack Russell, Mojo—or Mr Mojo Risin', to give him his full title. I love it when I get home on a Thursday night and he is waiting in the hallway for me—more than any other members of my family, it is the dog who is waiting for me.

I support the general principles of the bill and I look forward to working with colleagues across the chamber to ensure that it offers real protection not only to the animals but to the people who love them.

16:26

Rhoda Grant: It has been an interesting debate. It is good to see so much agreement around the chamber about how the bill is viewed. Richard Leonard said that it is about compassion and decency. I think that that is right: it is not only about the welfare of the animal but about the welfare of the owner. Others have referred to the pleasure and company that dogs give us. Jamie Halcro Johnston and Mark Ruskell said that dogs are members of the family—for those who own dogs, that is so true.

If it is to achieve anything, the bill will need to raise awareness of such crime. Members do not often have resources to do that, so it would be good if the Government were to explore how we could do so. I understand that it is setting up an advisory group, so perhaps that group could consider how we might raise such awareness.

Mark Ruskell said that the introduction of the UK legislation saw a fall in the number of thefts, but that it is difficult to say whether that was an effect of the legislation. We will need to have an eye to that, especially if we are to undertake post-legislative scrutiny.

Richard Leonard and Emma Harper talked about other aspects that we should consider in relation to animal welfare. Emma Harper introduced her own bill on sheep worrying, which became the Dogs (Protection of Livestock) (Amendment) (Scotland) Act 2021. Richard Leonard talked about dog fighting and organised crime. There is agreement around the chamber that there is a need for more comprehensive legislation.

I join Richard Leonard and Elena Whitham in making a plea for similar provision for cats. I am owned by a cat—that is the difference between

cats and dogs—and cats need protection as well, although I think that they would probably make their own way home if someone decided to take them.

Finlay Carson: Given Rhoda Grant's position on the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee since the start of this parliamentary session, she will recognise that there were discussions there about a committee bill to look at bringing all the pet legislation together. The opportunity to do that was not available because of the already heavy burden of legislation to consider. It should be down to the Government to introduce a consolidation bill that would include cats and other pet animals.

Rhoda Grant: Yes, I think that that is a really good idea. Committee time is heavily constrained, so it is difficult to see how that could otherwise be done. The lack of committee time is also the reason for the lack of post-legislative scrutiny that is undertaken.

Christine Grahame: As a cat lover, I want to correct what Rhoda Grant said. The saying is, "Dogs have owners. Cats have staff."

Rhoda Grant: That is indeed true. My cat tells me what I should do, not the other way round. I try to tell her what to do, but she does not listen.

To be serious, and to return to the bill, many members have talked about data collection. We need to get that right, because we need to know what the scale of the problem is and how prevalent dog theft is.

Elena Whitham talked about the scale of the animal cruelty that is perpetrated in the context of domestic abuse. Although that might not be an issue for the bill, we need to record the fact that it happens. It forces people back into abusive relationships. We have all heard of animals being harmed or killed by an abuser in retaliation for someone leaving home. We need to ensure that it is known that that can happen. The fact that someone can abuse an animal is an indicator that they could be abusive to people as well. There is a read-across there.

It is true that post-legislative scrutiny is required, but I am not sure that committees have the capacity to do that.

The bill has a lot of support—it is supported by Dogs Trust, the Scottish SPCA, Blue Cross, Guide Dogs and many other organisations. We are obliged to get the bill right and to introduce better legislation in the next session of Parliament that will bring together all the legislation that we have in this area, so that it is comprehensive and covers all aspects.

16:31

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): As a dog owner, I am pleased to close the debate for the Conservatives. Alfie makes my life complete. Since we brought him home in February three years ago, I have become a bit of a convert. However, I am gutted that, as yet, he has only been second in the Holyrood dog of the year competition—my partner Alasdair nearly sent him back home.

The theft of a dog is one of the most traumatic things that can happen to an owner. However, the law currently considers it in the same way as it would the theft of an inanimate object, which, given what we have heard today, is not fair.

Maurice Golden's bill seeks to take into account the welfare impact of a dog theft on both the owner and the dog, to act as a deterrent by introducing much harsher penalties for those who are found guilty of an offence, and to enable more accurate data recording to take place to help to identify areas for further interventions. As we have heard, the bill also seeks to bring Scotland into line with England and Northern Ireland, where the UK Pet Abduction Act 2024 provides for the emotional impact on owners to be considered as part of sentencing. In our general election manifesto, we committed to better protecting dogs against theft, and we highlighted how much we are committed to animal welfare.

Maurice Golden spoke about how interested he is in the principles of justice and about how losing a dog to theft compounds the sense of trauma. It was good to hear from the convener of the lead committee for consideration of the bill that the stage 1 report was balanced, rigorous and fair, and that there was unanimous support for its recommendations. We also heard how open Maurice Golden is to working with everyone to refine the bill further at stage 2.

It was disappointing to hear that the Scottish Government has offered only conditional support for the bill, in that it wants to remove the provisions on victim statements and the requirement for the Government to publish an annual report on the operation of the legislation. That was related to resource issues. However, the Government is committed to delivering a reporting component in whatever way that might be possible.

We also heard about the significance of providing for an aggravation in relation to the theft of an assistance dog, given the impact on the lives of people who rely on assistance dogs.

It was good to hear from the convener of the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee that dogs are more than property and how important it is to have a stand-alone offence of dog theft.

I turn to Jamie Halcro Johnston's comments. I am delighted to hear that Buster was rehomed after his award-winning appearance at Holyrood dog of the year. He also spoke about something that is not often mentioned in Parliament, which is how often abducted dogs can go on to face really horrific cruelty.

Rhoda Grant wants the Government to provide a more comprehensive piece of legislation, and Mark Ruskell spoke about how inadequate the current legal framework is.

I was not quite sure what was coming next from Mr Leonard. I thought that we were going to be in floods of tears as he was building up to his comments about the unconditional love that has come to him in his later life, now that he knows about the benefits of dog ownership and the importance of compassion and decency. I was getting my tissues out over here.

We have had some great stories, including the one about Beetle and Ruby. The social media content and news of the campaign to find those two Border terriers made it up to Edinburgh, so I am very aware of that.

We know that the bill has overwhelming support from the public and from all the organisations concerned, and it has been great to hear cross-party support from across the chamber this afternoon. I am delighted. We need to accept that the current law fails to consider the emotional value that a dog brings, and that we need to support owners and deter thieves. My colleague Maurice Golden's bill addresses those issues by introducing a statutory offence.

Scottish Conservatives will be delighted to support the bill as it moves forward from stage 1.

16:35

Siobhian Brown: We are a nation of animal lovers, and many of our households have or look after animals. Whether it is a goldfish or a horse, animals play a major role in our lives. Many of us do not even stop to think about patting a dog or a cat as they walk past us.

However, it is dogs that go back the longest in our history. They are thought to be among the first animals that humans domesticated and brought into our lives and our homes. It is estimated that early domestication took place between 10,000 and 30,000 years ago. Dogs are now members of just under 30 per cent of households in Scotland.

I think that, given the content of members' speeches today, we can all agree that dogs play a major role in the lives of our families and households, as well as in wider society, and that they are very much loved. We can also agree that there is much support for the bill.

However, as the debate has also indicated, there are still important matters to be considered and I have to be clear about the Scottish Government's position. I have listened carefully to members' speeches and the issues that they have raised, and I am sure that Mr Golden will reflect on them ahead of stage 2, as will the Scottish Government.

I will comment on some of the issues that have been raised. Rhoda Grant asked about awareness raising. The Scottish Government will work with the member to publicise and raise awareness of the dog theft offence, should it become law. As I made clear to Mr Golden when I met him recently, the Scottish Government already has links with a wide range of stakeholders that have a strong interest in dog control and dog welfare policy matters. When I appeared before the committee, I spoke about the expert advisory group; it is now up and running and doing some great work. I hope to update the Parliament about that shortly, and I would be happy to get the group involved with awareness raising.

I come to Elena Whitham's comments about domestic abuse, and my response will also cover a bit of what Rhoda Grant mentioned. The issue was raised when I was before the committee. We know that the Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Act 2018 created the offence of engaging in a course of abusive behaviour against a partner or ex-partner, including behaviour that is directed towards pets or the removal of a pet from the partner or ex-partner when it is likely to cause the victim to suffer physical or psychological harm. Those provisions do not rely on the need for a specific offence of dog theft.

Looking at the relationship defence, I note that the views were offered in the absence of a specific recommendation in the committee report. Given that common-law theft will continue to apply and can be used where necessary in situations in which the relationship defence might arise, we do not have a view on whether the relationship defence is appropriate. Prosecutors could still continue to ensure that dog theft can be addressed using common-law powers or theft in any given relevant case.

Christine Grahame: It is unfortunate that I did not remark on section 1(2) in my speech. That is a tricky section. As a former divorce lawyer, I assure members that parties would agree on the division of household assets and bank accounts, but the biggest fight would be about the family pet. I agree with many of the things that Elena Whitham said, but I am just putting it into the pot that somebody might use the defence that somebody has been abusive so that they can keep the dog; sometimes, people will try anything to get what they want.

Siobhian Brown: I am totally sympathetic to the concerns raised by Elena Whitham. I am unsure whether this is the right bill to deal with that, but the issue could, perhaps, be considered.

Elena Whitham: I understand the narrow nature of a member's bill, which, as the committee also suggested, might not be the right vehicle. However, although there are provisions in the Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Act 2018 to allow for the prosecution of coercive control when an animal is used in that way, there is no data to tell us how often that happens or how it is linked to dog theft. My question is about how those two things can ever possibly be linked.

Siobhian Brown: I am happy to take that away and meet the member to discuss the issue further. It might be something that the expert advisory group could look at; perhaps we could raise the issue with the group and take it from there. I am happy to take that idea away and consider it.

As I appreciate that all of our pets are loved, I now move on to the topic of cat theft. The common-law offence of theft offers robust protection, including for pets, with a maximum penalty that goes all the way up to a life sentence for cases that are tried in the High Court. I listened to what Finlay Carson said about the evidence that the committee took regarding opening the bill up to other pets. A number of members have made valid points about the consolidation of legislation. We are all aware that we do not have any time in this session of Parliament due to the amount of legislation that we are trying to pass during the next several months, but I definitely think that that should be dealt with in the next session.

I turn to the request for the definition of "assistance dog" to be widened. I understand that the SSPCA previously provided the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee with a research paper on defining the terms that are used for animals working in support roles. I am aware that the committee had concerns about the definition of assistance dogs. In particular, the issue might be that not all dogs that provide assistance and support for their owners would be covered.

Although the bill includes an enabling power that allows for changes to the definition, that would create an issue for the Scottish Government to address further down the line. I had a conversation with Maurice Golden last week and welcome his commitment to lodge amendments at stage 2 to ensure that appropriate coverage is achieved for the aggravation so that it includes dogs that provide assistance to support their owners. That is a necessary part of the Scottish Government's support for the bill and I ask Maurice Golden when closing the debate to provide confirmation that he will take that action.

Dogs are vital and much-loved members of our families. If they are lost in any way, including as a result of theft, that brings grief to their owners and leaves a hole in those families. I hope that, by supporting the new dog theft offence, I am showing that the Scottish Government takes the issue seriously. If Parliament agrees today to the general principles of the bill, I look forward to working with Mr Golden at stage 2 to ensure that amendments are made so that the Scottish Government can continue its support for the bill to stage 3.

16:43

Maurice Golden: I thank all members for their speeches. It has been a good debate. I welcome the level of engagement on the issue, and with the bill, from members across the chamber. I also welcome the positive tone of the debate and the fact that many members have indicated their support for the general principles of the bill.

I recognise that members, including the committee convener and the minister, have highlighted particular areas where they consider that the bill should be amended. As I indicated in my opening speech, there are areas that I am happy to look at and where I will lodge amendments, for example to remove the requirement for a victim statement. I have also agreed to work with the minister to look at the particular definition of assistance dogs and at the provisions for annual reporting and reviews. Furthermore, I commit to on-going discussions to ensure that the bill is in the best possible position to become an act.

I look forward to doing that in advance of stage 2 proceedings. I will draw together a set of amendments that the entire committee, ideally, will be able to agree on. In addition to working with the Scottish Government, including with the minister, with whom I have worked very productively, I am very willing to meet other members who might have ideas for amendments.

I will cover some of the ideas that have been raised in the excellent speeches that were made during the debate. I am pleased that members are taking the bill so seriously and are coming up with constructive suggestions to improve it.

The minister, who is a dog lover, recognises the seriousness of the crime and highlighted concerns around victim statements and annual reporting. I am pleased that we have agreed a path forward on those points, which is now on the record, in the *Official Report*.

The lead committee and its convener, Finlay Carson, mentioned two issues that I will highlight. The first is on awareness raising. I agree with his point, but I would suggest that the issue be

covered in something that is linked to the bill rather than codified in primary legislation. Secondly, I also agree with the substantive point about publicising the bill, if it becomes law. I am sure that lots of members in the new session of Parliament will be willing to pose with their prized pooches for that purpose.

I hear and have looked at the argument about working dogs, but I am not convinced that there is a clear case for extending the bill to cover them. The existing aggravation in the bill is there to ensure that people who are unable to carry out day-to-day tasks—including reporting a crime, potentially—without the support of an assistance dog should receive additional protection in law.

Rachael Hamilton: I understand Maurice Golden's point about assistance dogs. In a way, a working dog is an assistance dog, for example, to a country keeper on a working shoot. Country keepers employ many people. We know how important countryside sports—which rely on working dogs—are to the economy. It would be foolhardy not to include them in the bill.

Maurice Golden: We can have that debate at stage 2. I think that there is a difference between a working dog and an assistance dog, but I hear Rachael Hamilton's case.

Jamie Halcro Johnston, whose dog was a medallist in the Holyrood dog of the year competition, described dog theft as "an abhorrent crime", highlighting the horrifying cruelty facing dogs that are stolen. Rhoda Grant described the lucrative trade of stolen dogs and outlined the heartbreak that families experience. She also suggested—I agree with her—that a comprehensive bill should be introduced that covers dog ownership and wider animal welfare. Although such a bill will not be for this parliamentary session, it should, in my view, be a Government bill in the next session.

Mark Ruskell pointed out that the current legal framework is inadequate. Christine Grahame thoroughly agrees with making dog theft a statutory offence and agrees with my colleague Rachael Hamilton's view on working dogs. Rachael Hamilton highlighted the case of Border terriers Beetle and Ruby, which were stolen and whose families are still holding out for their return.

Emma Harper highlighted the importance of data collection. Richard Leonard supported the bill on the basis of compassion and decency. Elena Whitham brought something new to the debate that I am very sympathetic to, which was about dogs being weaponised as part of a coercive relationship. However, I am less convinced about whether the bill is the appropriate place to deal with that issue.

Christine Grahame: Will the member take an intervention?

Maurice Golden: I am happy to.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Please make it brief, as Maurice Golden must begin to conclude.

Christine Grahame: On the point that we are dealing with, which is covered in section 1(2), I ask the member to reflect on what to do when there is a dispute of ownership between those in a cohabiting or a married couple, which is probably one of the most difficult issues to deal with when considering the bill.

Maurice Golden: Yes, but that strays into an area that is perhaps beyond a member's bill on dog theft, which has a very tight scope. However, the point that Elena Whitham made should be addressed urgently.

In conclusion, I hope that members will support the general principles of the bill at decision time, that we can leave with a spring in our step and our tails up, and that dog owners, dog lovers and other stakeholders can be reassured that the Parliament recognises that the theft of a dog is a horrific crime that leads to emotional trauma and heartbreak, and that it must be treated accordingly by the law.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate on the Dog Theft (Scotland) Bill at stage 1.

Urgent Question

16:50

"Scotland's colleges 2025"

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what urgent action it will take to address the reported crisis in the college sector, in light of the findings in the Audit Scotland publication, "Scotland's colleges 2025".

The Minister for Higher and Further Education (Ben Macpherson): I note the publication and I have read it carefully. As the First Minister made clear earlier, the Government is committed to ensuring that we invest in our college sector to support students to move on to positive destinations. However, the challenges that we face in managing our public finances have not in any way been helped by the austerity policies of successive UK Governments, the recent increases in employers' national insurance contributions for Scotland's colleges and across the public sector or the impact of energy bills and inflation on the operating costs of colleges.

Despite the challenging financial climate during the current financial year, the Scottish Government is investing more than three quarters of a billion pounds in our 24 colleges to support apprenticeships and a wide range of skills and qualifications. 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 to help colleges to invest in the learning experience of students and in the skills that Scotland needs for the future, which is exactly what the Government and all Governments should be doing.

Stephen Kerr: Excuses, excuses, excuses—blaming everybody and taking no responsibility for the decisions that the Government has made. That is typical of the Scottish National Party Government. We also had the First Minister in denial and almost writing off Audit Scotland's report and not taking any notice of what it says.

The report says that college funding has been cut by 20 per cent in real terms since 2021-22. Seven colleges were in deficit last year, with two requiring bailouts, staff morale is collapsing and thousands of students are losing out on opportunities. Gavin Donoghue of Colleges Scotland warned that those cuts had

"directly led to less students and unsustainable cuts to staff numbers",

crumbling estates and

"reductions in courses on offer." [*Interruption*.]

Members can heckle all they like; I am repeating what Audit Scotland and Colleges Scotland have said, but that might not be good enough for some members.

Does the minister accept that cutting off access to college is hypocritical of the SNP Government? The Government is, in effect, kicking away the ladder out of poverty for thousands of young people. Will he commit to restoring funding so that colleges can play their full part in tackling inequality and creating equality of opportunity for all?

Ben Macpherson: I record my appreciation and admiration for college staff, both in my capacity as an MSP representing my constituents and in my capacity as minister serving the people of Scotland as a whole. The Government and I strongly recognise the contribution that our colleges make to enabling people to fulfil their potential and improve their circumstances. That is why there was an increase in spending on our colleges of 2.6 per cent in this financial year.

The question of the public finances is challenging. No one is denying that. The First Minister emphasised it today, and I am emphasising it now. We are operating in an environment in which inflation costs went up in the years that are stated in the Audit Scotland report. I very much respect the report and will be carefully examining the recommendations, but we cannot ignore the fact that we are operating in an environment in which the Scottish budget has been cut for many years, and in which inflation has eroded the capacity of the budget to be utilised. It is an environment in which increased national insurance contributions have been imposed on the Scottish public sector without recourse to repayment of those from the United Kingdom Government. I met Colleges Scotland today, and I am looking forward to working with it constructively on the challenges that we face together and on ensuring that Scotland's people are able to fulfil their potential, including through our colleges.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): There is a great amount of interest in this item of business, but we must have more concise questions and responses, and we must hear one another.

Stephen Kerr: If the minister, who I like—and who, by the way, has been badly served by whoever wrote his answers—has admiration for Colleges Scotland, why is the Government cutting college funding? That is not according to the Conservatives but according to Audit Scotland, whose honesty I greatly admire for bringing to light these facts. Audit Scotland is warning us that colleges are being forced to prioritise cheaper courses over costlier courses, which are the ones

that are in demand by employers. Apprenticeship demand is going unmet.

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): Question!

The Presiding Officer: Mr Stewart, I remind you that I am chairing this session. I have called for concise questions and responses. When questions and responses are exceptionally long, we will be unable to take any further questions from members.

Stephen Kerr: Colleges Scotland makes it clear that a cut to college funding of a fifth is damaging life chances and shrinking the skills base on which Scotland's economy depends. At a time when we need a highly skilled, future-proofed workforce to drive growth and prosperity, why is the Government funding colleges on the cheap? Why is the Government cutting funding? Will the minister admit that that failure is not only harming individual students and their families but actively sabotaging Scotland's economic future?

Ben Macpherson: A quarter of the way into the 21st century, we are living through a time of extreme economic change. We have huge economic potential to realise in Scotland. We are attracting in more direct investment, and our skills system is fundamental to that.

I have made it very clear since coming into post that, along with all my Scottish Government colleagues, we are committed to working with employers, colleges, universities, local government and wider Scottish society to realise the huge potential of our people. That involves making a 2.6 per cent increase in the college budget this year, but it also involves working with our college sector, which I met collaboratively today, on transformation and meeting the needs of our economy.

I look forward to reflecting on the recommendations in the Audit Scotland report, and working collaboratively with the SFC, Colleges Scotland and the wider sector to realise more of Scotland's remarkable human potential. The Government is absolutely committed to investing in that potential.

Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP): I am delighted that some Conservative members have managed to stay in the chamber instead of running away in terror when I raise a point.

First, does the minister, like me, find it surprising that Audit Scotland's report makes little mention of the impact of rising national insurance contributions—in the case of Forth Valley College, it is £600,000 a year straight on to the wage bill—the cost of living crisis or the continuing effects of Brexit? To what extent is he able to factor into the Government's assessment of the financial sustainability of our colleges those extraneous but burdensome factors?

Ben Macpherson: Keith Brown is right to emphasise that, although the Government continues to make the commitment and the investment that is available within its constrained budget—I talked earlier about the 2.6 per cent increase in revenue funding for our colleges—we operate in an external environment that constantly presents challenges. Whether it is the austerity that has been delivered since 2010, Brexit, the external circumstances of the pandemic, the Liz Truss budget or the current employer national insurance increase from the Labour Party, those things have an impact, and they matter. [*Interruption*.]

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear the minister.

Ben Macpherson: Rising national insurance contributions have added £11 million of extra cost on to our colleges. The Scottish Government is seeking to alleviate that by providing £5.5 million, but the actions of the UK Government absolutely matter in this situation. Unfortunately, it has added costs on to our public sector and is not helping us to move forward with economic growth.

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): It is important to remind members and those watching, particularly colleges and students, that the minister can reiterate the 2 per cent increase as often as he likes, but it is false. Audit Scotland has said that colleges have had a 20 per cent cut in the past five years.

I also remind the minister that the UK Government has given the Scottish Government the largest settlement since devolution, yet for years colleges have been sounding alarm bells and telling ministers that there is no coherence in the system or linking of provision of education to the jobs and skills that our economy needs, but the minister still blames other people. These vital institutions have been left without leadership from their Government and, in the vacuum, colleges have had to struggle on themselves. That is not how a national skills system is supposed to be run. If everyone else can see how valuable colleges really are, why can his Government not? What will he urgently do to prove to the colleges that he is not going to blame someone else and that he is going to take responsibility?

Ben Macpherson: This Government and I take absolute responsibility for realising the potential of the Scottish people. That is why we have invested in them consistently, including by providing free tuition for years when it is not available elsewhere in these islands. Let me say very clearly, so that there is no doubt, that the Government values the contribution of everyone who works in our college

sector. We recognise the huge economic and social contribution that all 24 of those institutions make. We look forward to working with them to support the offer that they provide to learners but also to think about the demands and needs of the 21st century as we move into its second quarter, so that we can realise the human potential in our communities and the huge economic potential of our country.

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): I very much welcome the minister to his new role, but I point out to him that a number of members across the chamber have written to him about the proposed closure of the Alloa campus of Forth Valley College—a move that would be devastating for the community. Will he commit to coming to Alloa to meet us, unions and others who are concerned about the closure, and to work on a cross-party basis to ensure that the college can remain open to serve the community for generations to come?

Ben Macpherson: The member is right to raise the importance of the contribution of the Alloa campus of Forth Valley College to the local community and the wide social and economic benefits that it provides. As the First Minister made clear earlier, this Government will make sure that everything is done to keep the campus open so that students in the area have access to the first-rate services and learning that the college provides.

As has been stated to Parliament, the Scottish Funding Council is working incredibly closely with the college on those matters, and we will seek to keep members with a local interest and Parliament more widely informed as the SFC continues that engagement. I look forward to further engagement with the member, and I thank him for constructively bringing that important matter to the chamber.

Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP): It is vital that the Scottish Government works on increasing the positive destinations that are available to Scotland's school leavers. Will the minister speak further on that progress, as well as on the role that colleges play in fulfilling our young people's potential?

Ben Macpherson: I thank Paul McLennan for giving me the opportunity to emphasise the importance of colleges in supporting people in their learning journeys and making sure that we fulfil the skills need in our economy. The geographic differentiation of that skills need will become even more important in the period ahead. I look forward to engaging with the member and all those who have an interest in expanding and enhancing the offer appropriately for the need in their communities, and to working with local authorities, members and the bodies involved.

We have huge potential; there is great learning, and tens of thousands of our young and older people are achieving well through our colleges. I look forward to continuing to support our colleges by working with Colleges Scotland and individual institutions.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind): Have Mr Kerr and the Conservatives, or even Pam Duncan-Glancy and Labour, suggested to the minister where the extra money that they want to give to colleges should come from? Does the minister think that they want to cut funding from the national health service? Do they want to cut funding from universities? Do they want to raise tax?

The Presiding Officer: Mr Macpherson should answer in relation to the substantive question.

Ben Macpherson: I will make an important broader point. In the Parliament, we all have a shared interest in representing our constituents in the best way possible, and we all have a shared responsibility to debate the choices before us seriously and in the wider context in which we have to operate. As we go into an important budget period, whether we are discussing college funding or other matters, we need to have seriousness across the chamber, as well as creative ideas and collaboration. My ministerial colleagues and I have a doors-open policy for hearing ideas, and I look forward to members thinking creatively and responsibly in the period ahead.

Decision Time

17:05

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): There is one question to be put as a result of today's business. The question is, that motion S6M-19121, in the name of Maurice Golden, on the Dog Theft (Scotland) Bill at stage 1, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees to the general principles of the Dog Theft (Scotland) Bill.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Give Blood 4 Good

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-18736, in the name of Fulton MacGregor, on commending Give Blood 4 Good's efforts to secure Scotland's blood supply. The debate will be concluded without any question being put, and I invite members who wish to participate to press their request-to-speak buttons.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament commends the charitable work of Give Blood 4 Good (GB4G), which was founded in 2019 in memory of Patrick Smith, an Edinburgh student who passed away and who was a passionate advocate for blood donation; understands that GB4G was established to address a significant gap in the number of young people becoming blood donors, and to encourage a new generation to step forward; recognises what it sees as the effectiveness of its educational initiatives, including the Young Ambassador Programme for high school students, which uses e-learning and hands-on activities to inform and engage students; believes that this programme not only educates young people on the lifesaving importance of blood donation but also provides them with transferable skills that can be used on CVs and university applications; understands that each blood donation has the potential to save or improve up to three lives; welcomes the charity's work, and recognises the importance of blood donation in Coatbridge and Chryston and across Scotland.

17:07

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): I thank the members who supported the motion, and I thank the Minister for Drug and Alcohol Policy and Sport and the Government for engaging with me on the matter and for offering to meet representatives from Give Blood 4 Good. I declare that I am a regular blood donor and that my next blood donation will be my 19th.

It is an honour to lead the debate and to shine a light on the brilliant work of Give Blood 4 Good, or GB4G. Building on the concerns that I have previously raised in the chamber about the future of blood donation and the essential role of the Scottish National Blood Transfusion Service, I return to the issue to highlight the inspiring work of Give Blood 4 Good, which is mobilising the next generation of donors. I thank Hanna Smith and Martha Greenbank for founding in 2019 what is a remarkable charity in memory of Hanna's brother, Patrick Smith, an Edinburgh student whose life was tragically cut short at just 21.

Patrick was a proper champion. From the day that he turned 17—the youngest age at which someone can donate blood—he was first in line, with his sleeves rolled up, encouraging everyone around him to do the same. After his sudden death in 2019, his family grieved, but they also built a

lasting foundation. GB4G was created to carry Patrick's passion forward by inspiring more young people to donate blood and, in doing so, save lives.

Let me paint a picture. At the very first blood drive that was held in Patrick's name, more than 150 people turned up. That is a big deal because, across the United Kingdom, most 18 to 24-year-olds have never donated, with fear given as one of the biggest reasons why they have not.

Only a small percentage of adults give blood regularly, and, in Scotland alone, we lost more than 13,000 donors in 2021, in the wake of the pandemic. That kind of drop puts serious strain on the national health service, and that is where GB4G comes in, as it makes it easier to show up, feel safe, and get involved.

Blood donation keeps our NHS going. One donation can make the difference between life and death for someone in urgent need. Every donation can save or improve up to three lives. I ask members to think about that: three families given hope—whether it is a mum in labour, a crash survivor or someone battling cancer or sickle-cell disease, that matters. We are talking about real people facing real emergencies, and our hospitals depend on that generosity every day. When blood runs low, operations are pushed back and lives are put at risk.

Since GB4G launched, its donors have saved or improved the lives of an estimated 16,362 people, and that impact continues. Just this week, there was a local blood donation drive in my constituency. Such local actions make a meaningful difference to the trajectory of blood donation across the country.

At the heart of the group's work is the young ambassador programme—YAP—which is genuinely inspiring. Piloted in schools such as the Glasgow Academy, it gets young people fired up about donation before they are even old enough to give blood. Through e-learning about blood types and transfusion needs, and hands-on activities, those students can become real advocates. In the pilot, 15 secondary 5 and S6 pupils turned their school into a hub of awareness. The programme is also about building practical skills, including leadership and teamwork, allowing young people to grow and make a real difference. Those young ambassadors walk away with CV gold and are saving lives along the way.

The work does not stop there. GB4G's Bloody Brilliant Uni Squad secured nearly 1,000 pledges last year, 64 per cent of which were from first-time donors. One campaign, for a young woman who needed more than 100 transfusions during leukaemia treatment, gathered 230 pledges, including 116 new donors. That effort potentially saved 690 lives.

We should also recognise Ollie Smith, Patrick's brother and a Glasgow Warriors star, who became GB4G's first official ambassador in May 2024. He is out there visiting schools and putting up social media posts, telling young people that Patrick's passion was infectious and saying, "Let's keep it going."

GB4G is also changing the way that people think about blood donation. In October 2024, it teamed up with WeDonate, a platform that offers perks and rewards to regular donors through brand partnerships. That does not just provide nice extras; it helps fund youth-focused programmes such as YAP and the Bloody Brilliant Uni Squad and, more important, it turns donation into a habit rather than a one-off act. As co-founder Martha Greenbank put it,

"We're making giving blood as normal as recycling—because lives depend on it."

The need could not be clearer. Right now, 55 per cent of active blood donors in Scotland are aged 45 and over. The youngest age group, 17 to 24, remains the least represented. The numbers are stark: 70 per cent of 18 to 24-year-olds have never donated, and just 11 per cent give blood regularly. That gap is not just a statistic; it is a real risk to the future of our blood supply.

The core objective here is to work to increase all numbers. There are important signs of hope in relation to the youngest group. Thanks to effective targeted education and outreach, almost 1,000 young people pledged to donate through university programmes in the past academic year. Many of them were first-time donors who might never have considered it before. That kind of progress shows what is possible with the right approach.

In our own communities, the opportunity is even greater. Rolling out YAP in schools could create a long-term pipeline of donors—people who understand the importance of donation early on and carry that commitment into adulthood.

Our maternity wards, accident and emergency departments and treatment centres rely on a steady supply of blood. We cannot afford to leave that to chance. By investing in education and making blood donation a normal part of life, GB4G is laying the foundation for a more resilient system—one that does not leave anyone behind.

However, to make that progress sustainable, we need a clear and proactive commitment from Government. Therefore, I call on ministers to work with GB4G and the Scottish National Blood Transfusion Service to formally integrate the young ambassador programme into the school curriculum across Scotland. I appreciate that that

is not within the remit of the minister who will respond to this debate, but I believe that early education is key. We need to encourage blood donation as a civic responsibility as well as a medical one.

Further, the Government should support and expand youth-led blood donation initiatives with dedicated funding, ensuring that programmes such as the Bloody Brilliant Uni Squad and community blood drives can scale up and reach more people. That means providing resources for outreach, marketing and partnership building with local authorities and educational institutions.

I also urge the Scottish Government to promote blood donation as a public health priority, with a national campaign that targets younger demographics directly, dispelling fears and misconceptions, and aiming to make donating blood a routine part of life, where that is appropriate for the individual—I have not mentioned this yet, but I acknowledge that, obviously, there are people who cannot donate blood.

Local councils and public bodies should be encouraged to facilitate donation opportunities by providing accessible venues and time-off policies for workers to give blood. The Scottish Government can lead by example by ensuring that its employees have the flexibility to donate during working hours.

In closing, I invite all members to visit giveblood4good.org, pledge to donate, encourage schools in their area to join YAP and take the message back to their communities, friends, families and constituents. Let us honour Patrick not just with words but with action—donate, educate and save lives. In Scotland, generosity runs deep. Starting today, let us keep that spirit—and the hope that it brings—flowing.

17:15

Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP): Presiding Officer, I apologise to you and the other members in the chamber for having to leave before the end of the debate this evening.

I thank Fulton MacGregor for bringing forward the debate. As he said, Give Blood 4 Good is a Scottish registered charity that works to improve participation in blood donation by increasing awareness and education among young adults in particular, breaking down misconceptions and empowering people to become regular donors. That involves collaboration with schools and universities. As he mentioned, the charity does outreach through student ambassadors, who share donor and recipient stories and organise community events, which are all aimed at fostering a culture in which blood donation is a regular and respected part of young people's lives. The charity runs a young ambassador programme, where students lead awareness and donation initiatives within their institutions.

As Fulton MacGregor said, the charity was founded in 2019, in memory of Patrick Smith, a keen swimmer who was involved in the University of Edinburgh's swimming and water polo club. I know that that was a passion of his, but he was also extremely passionate about blood donation, so much so that he gave his first blood as soon as he was able to—on his 17th birthday. Every time that Patrick donated, he would advocate how important it was to do so and, at every opportunity that he had, would encourage his friends and family members to give blood.

Following a blood drive in Patrick's honour, where more than 150 people donated blood, it was realised that more than 60 per cent of people who took part had never given blood before. Most of them were young adults and had no intentions of giving blood again in the future. Further research has been done, and, according to an NHS statistic, 81 per cent of 18 to 24-year-olds in the United Kingdom have never donated blood, and 35 per cent of that age group admitted that they were scared to do so.

My mum has been donating blood for many years. The blood donation unit would come to Dunbar grammar school every so often, and she would always visit it. I have been giving blood for a number of years, and in the past few years I have also started to donate platelets. My daughter gave blood when she was in her earlier years—she was just over 17—and she now donates platelets as well. We often debate who has the better platelets—she knows that it is me, of course. Three generations of the family are donating, and that shows the importance of starting to donate as early as possible.

To build on some of the points that Mr MacGregor mentioned, only 4 per cent of people in Scotland who are eligible to donate blood do so. There are many reasons why people cannot donate, which makes it even more important for people to do so when they can.

Every time that someone gives blood, they can save the lives of up to three people. All blood donations are separated into three components—red blood cells, plasma and platelets. One blood donation can save or improve the lives of up to three people. That means that the exact products can be given to those who need them, while ensuring that none of the blood donated goes to waste.

Every day, 400 new donors are needed to meet the demand for blood in the UK. Adults and children who suffer from anaemia, cancer and

blood disorders are dependent on regular blood donations, and most cannot survive without them.

Every minute, four units of blood are issued to UK hospitals to help patients. Blood donations are also needed for people who require major and emergency surgeries, and to treat blood loss after childbirth. To meet that demand, 5,000 people need to give blood every day. People can donate once they are 17. More than half of regular blood donors are over the age of 45, so we need more young and diverse donors to donate. As soon as someone is 17, they are eligible to donate blood.

Women aged 17 to 34 are twice as likely to donate than men of the same age, but men tend to have more iron and a higher platelet count than women, which means that they can donate more regularly. Furthermore, only men's blood can be used for transfusions in newborn babies. That highlights the fact that we need more men to regularly donate.

The clear message is: book an appointment today.

17:19

Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con): I start by congratulating Fulton MacGregor on securing this important debate. I always enjoy his members' business debates and the campaigns that he works on, because not only does he bring the problems to the chamber but, often, he brings the solutions, too. I strongly associate myself with the calls that he has made on the Government, which all seem to be reasonable and practical steps that could make a real difference.

It is a pleasure to follow Paul McLennan, who has inspired me to get on and book an appointment to give blood. I was a regular donor in the past—I started when I was at school—and then, probably exactly as Fulton MacGregor mentioned, I was one of those people who got out of the way of it during the pandemic. I think that I have done it once since the pandemic. Although it is worth while and important to contribute to the debate and to encourage the Government to act, those of us who can should be looking to roll up our sleeves, and I reflect on the fact that I have not been good at doing that. Therefore, I am very grateful to the 112,251 active donors in Scotland, who make time to do that.

However, as we have heard, we are still facing on-going donation blood shortages, which is why it is really important that organisations such as Give Blood 4 Good play their important role in raising awareness. We must also recognise their ability to reach out in a different way. In the past, many initiatives have relied on adverts on the backs of buses or broadcast during television programmes, flyers posted through doors, or word of mouth. If we want to reach young people and a new audience, we need to meet people where they are. That is what is so good and inspiring about this initiative—it recognises the need to do that underlying work.

As we have heard, giving blood is life changing for both the donor and the person receiving the blood. In the speeches so far, we have heard about the range of people who need blood, often unexpectedly, after an operation, complications during childbirth or a serious accident. It could be a child battling cancer or a victim of a car crash. If we found ourselves or our families in any of those situations, we would be absolutely desperate to know that a blood transfusion was available, but that relies on each and every one of us playing our part.

It is interesting to reflect on the fact that, in other areas of medicine, lots of new treatments have become available and there have been lots of medical advances that have led to different types of care, but blood cannot be manufactured en masse. There is no laboratory that can step in to do that. We are the one source of this life-preserving fluid, which is what makes blood donation and increasing the number of blood donors so important. That is why the steps that have been outlined should be taken.

I pay tribute to the friends and family of Patrick Smith, whose example stands as an inspiration to us all. They can take a great deal of comfort in the organisation that has grown around him and the number of lives that, as Fulton MacGregor said, have potentially been saved. I hope that we will hear from the minister that at least some of the points that Fulton MacGregor set out are things that the Government can act on.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Carol Mochan is the final speaker in the open debate.

17:24

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): I apologise that I am not in the chamber this evening, because the order of business was changed, but, like others, I so wanted to speak in this debate. I thank Fulton MacGregor for bringing this important debate to the chamber and I join him and others in commending the work of Give Blood 4 Good, which has done a great deal, as we have heard, to encourage young people to donate blood.

I, too, thank all those who continue to come forward and donate. Donations make sure that hospitals continue to have a good supply of blood. As we have heard, demand can be really unpredictable and blood has a very short shelf life, so there is no such thing as too many donors—blood is always in high demand.

We must never underestimate the impact that a single donation can make. As the motion states,

"each blood donation has the potential to save or improve up to three lives".

That is why we must continue to champion and celebrate the work of organisations and charities such as Give Blood 4 Good, which help to raise awareness of the difference that one donation can make.

As we heard, Give Blood 4 Good was established when it became clear that there was a gap in young people's awareness and education around giving blood. Many were not fully informed on the life-changing impact that blood donations can have, and Give Blood 4 Good sets out to change that. Through innovations, it has worked to improve young people's education and understanding in order to encourage as many as possible to donate. Its young ambassador programme helps to break down the fears and misconceptions that are commonly associated with donating blood. It educates young people when they are still at school, allowing them to be well informed before they turn 17. That is key, because 17 is the age at which young people can make their first donation. Understanding the importance of blood donation before that is therefore essential.

I am pleased that the Parliament is recognising the work of Give Blood 4 Good and that, through this debate, we can continue to support its work. As members have highlighted, blood donations can be life changing and they are an easy way to help others. As Oliver Mundell said, we should put ourselves in that place as well, and as many members as possible who can donate blood should do so. Whether the blood is used to treat cancer patients or to save those who have lost blood through an accident, surgery or childbirth, donations have a real power to save lives.

When I was researching for this debate, it was heartwarming to read the personal stories of those who have received a blood donation. Many testimonies highlighted the impact of stranger's generosity and kindness, and they came from both those who have received blood and their families.

In just one hour, we have the power to transform a life. I recognise how busy day-to-day life can be, but I hope that this debate allows us to pause, reflect, remember the difference that a donation can make, and consider speaking to others about the issue. Supporting public awareness is important, and I hope that the minister will speak to the on-going work that the Government is doing to support the charity and others and help with awareness.

I thank everybody who has contributed to the debate and, of course, all those in the Scottish National Blood Transfusion Service who work tirelessly with our NHS to continue to make sure that we have a high-quality supply of blood, tissues and cells every day. I again thank Give Blood 4 Good for all the work that it does in Patrick Smith's name.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Ms Mochan. I add my thanks to the Scottish National Blood Transfusion Service for making a return visit to Orkney for the first time in 16 years earlier this year, which allowed me to donate at home rather than down in Edinburgh.

With that, I invite Maree Todd to respond to the debate.

17:28

The Minister for Drug and Alcohol Policy and Sport (Maree Todd): Thank you, Presiding Officer. We Highland and Islanders do find it easier to donate down here in Edinburgh.

I am speaking on behalf of the Minister for Public Health and Women's Health, who is unable to be here.

Following the debate on organ and tissue donation last Thursday evening, I, too, welcome this debate on blood donation. It gives us an opportunity to pay tribute to the work of the Scottish National Blood Transfusion Service, which also carries out important work on tissue and stem cell donation, some of which we heard about last week. The debate also enables us to highlight the really important supporting role that is played by charities such as Give Blood 4 Good in encouraging young people to donate blood. I thank members for their speeches and, in particular, Fulton MacGregor for lodging the motion.

The key priority of the SNBTS is to ensure that the NHS has enough blood to meet the transfusion needs of patients in Scotland. The NHS needs a continuous supply of blood and platelets to keep cancer care services, maternity wards, accident and emergency departments and other life-saving services running.

When someone gives blood, their donation is split into three separate parts: red cells, platelets and plasma. That means that one hour out of their day can help to save or improve the lives of up to three separate people.

To be ready to help Scotland's patients in that way, the SNBTS aims to retain five to seven days of stock for each blood type at any time. To be able to do that, it absolutely relies on the generosity of the almost 93,670 active blood donors in Scotland who, between them, have made 161,536 donor attendances in the past 12 months. Depending on hospital demand, the

SNBTS aims to welcome 483 donors every day. Therefore, every day, blood donors save or improve the lives of people across Scotland.

As of today, blood stocks in Scotland are at satisfactory levels for all blood groups, which is only the case thanks to the work of the SNBTS and the contributions of all our donors. However, blood stocks can fluctuate, particularly over holiday periods, which is why it is important to encourage people who can donate to attend blood-donation sessions.

Everyone can do their bit in that respect. I donated blood in February and September this year at the Edinburgh blood donor centre. I assure colleagues that it is just along the road—less than 10 minutes' cycle away—and it is open until 7 pm on Parliament sitting days, helpfully. The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care donated blood in January, too. The timing of that visit was really useful, because it enabled him to support the SNBTS's blood drive over the winter months. Patients need life-saving blood all year round and, as we all know, the NHS does not stop over winter. The cabinet secretary was able to meet the donor carers and nurses at the centre, along with some donors, and he visited a plasmapheresis donor suite.

As well as in Edinburgh, the SNBTS has donation centres in Glasgow, Aberdeen, Dundee and Inverness, and it runs many community sessions across the country. Donors are asked to make an appointment to give blood to ensure that the SNBTS can help patients better. Managing the number of donors at each session enables the SNBTS to monitor expected stocks of different blood types in advance and adjust plans if needed. The aim of the arrangements is to make it as easy as possible to donate blood.

In addition to blood, the SNBTS is now asking people to donate blood plasma, which is used to produce certain medicines. The medicines can be used to treat more than 50 diseases, including autoimmune diseases and haemolytic disease in babies. There are currently 1,191 plasma donors in Scotland, and the SNBTS hopes to welcome another 1,000 new donors over the course of 2025. Plasma can be donated in any of the SNBTS blood donor centres.

To commemorate world blood donor day this year, the Minister for Public Health and Women's Health visited the haemophilia, thrombosis and immunology unit at the Royal infirmary of Edinburgh in June. The visit showcased the importance of the SNBTS's plasma for medicines programme, which is funded by the Scottish Government. During the visit, Ms Minto was able to hear directly from clinicians and patients about the importance of the medicines, and she noted that the visit was very useful in promoting the need for more plasma donors.

As other members have said, the SNBTS saw a decrease in the number of people donating blood following the Covid-19 pandemic. Donor numbers have now begun to rise again, but more donors are still needed to ensure that we can maintain blood supplies at safe levels. New young donors are particularly needed to ensure a sustainable future for the blood donor base in Scotland.

Fulton MacGregor: I want to ask something that came up in my discussion with the GB4G group. Is there any discussion with the SNBTS about possibly allowing smaller donations by new blood donors? A donation has to be a pint of blood; I know that there are quite a lot of rules around that. However, getting people in to give smaller donations—at least for the first couple of times—might ease people in, because donating a pint can be quite off-putting for a lot of young first-time donors.

Maree Todd: We can certainly discuss doing that—I will ask Jenni Minto to raise it in her regular communication with the SNBTS. I imagine that there would be challenges in relation to the size of the collection. I regularly give blood and I assure the member that you do not miss it at all—a pint can easily go without your feeling any impact whatsoever. Maybe reassurance is what is required, rather than an adjustment in the process.

In line with lots of global blood donor services, Scotland faces an ageing donor base. As others have said, 55 per cent of Scotland's active donor base are now aged 45 or over. Donors aged 17 to 24 are the smallest group of active donors in Scotland. The SNBTS already does excellent work with schools, colleges and universities. It also has a formal school talk programme and has delivered 84 school talks in the past year, delivering the message to almost 5,000 young people. That has directly resulted in more than 1,000 donors from secondary 5 and 6 in schools in Scotland, and those efforts have caused donor registrations from people aged 24 and under to increase by up to 30 per cent in the past 12 months.

However, we can always do more. That is why I welcome the contribution of charities such as Give Blood 4 Good. As we have heard, Give Blood 4 Good has been doing excellent work since it was set up in 2019 in memory of Patrick Smith. I offer my warmest condolences to the friends and family of Patrick, who was such a passionate advocate for blood donation and who has had such a big influence since his passing. Give Blood 4 Good works in close consultation and has really good relations with the SNBTS, which I commend.

I also pay particular tribute to Give Blood 4 Good's young ambassador programme and the

way in which it uses e-learning to help fifth and sixth-year students learn about the life-saving importance of blood donation. It is particularly important that we continue to attract young people to donate blood and, as such, I welcome the supporting work that Give Blood 4 Good is doing. The Minister for Public Health and Women's Health will be meeting the organisation in the coming weeks to progress that further. I assure colleagues that we are keen to reach that particular target demographic and we would be very happy to work with Give Blood 4 Good to maximise its impact.

The patients who receive blood donation cannot thank the donors personally. On their behalf and on behalf of the Minister for Public Health and Women's Health, I say thank you to all donors. This crucial service could not operate without the wonderful blood donors and I encourage anyone who is eligible to give blood to get along and do it. The debate today has made an important contribution to supporting that service.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, minister. With an hour and a half before—

Oliver Mundell: On a point of order, Deputy Presiding Officer. I apologise for delaying you and other colleagues longer than necessary. I have realised that I inadvertently used the wrong pre-Covid figure for the number of blood donors. I wanted to make members aware of that. My apologies.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Mundell. That concludes the debate.

Meeting closed at 17:37.

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