



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Meeting of the Parliament

Wednesday 8 October 2025

Session 6



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

© Parliamentary copyright. Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body

Information on the Scottish Parliament's copyright policy can be found on the website - www.parliament.scot or by contacting Public Information on 0131 348 5000

Wednesday 8 October 2025

CONTENTS

	Col.
PORTFOLIO QUESTION TIME	1
CONSTITUTION, EXTERNAL AFFAIRS AND CULTURE, AND PARLIAMENTARY BUSINESS	1
British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly	1
Libraries	3
International Strategy	4
Palestine (Humanitarian Assistance).....	5
Parliamentary Business (Scheduling)	7
Commonwealth War Graves	9
Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo (Overseas Tours and Performances).....	10
JUSTICE AND HOME AFFAIRS	11
Legal Aid (Survivors of Domestic Abuse)	11
Violent Crime (Dundee)	13
Age-of-sale Offences (Age-restricted Items)	15
E-Bikes and Off-road Vehicles (Misuse)	17
Prison Overcrowding (Suicide and Self-harm Prevention).....	19
Problem Street Drinkers	20
ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION	22
<i>Motion moved—[Russell Findlay].</i>	
<i>Amendment moved—[Màiri McAllan].</i>	
<i>Amendment moved—[Mark Griffin].</i>	
Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con).....	22
The Cabinet Secretary for Housing (Màiri McAllan)	25
Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab).....	28
Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green)	30
Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD)	31
Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con)	33
Jamie Hepburn (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP).....	34
Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con)	36
Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab).....	38
Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)	39
Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Reform)	40
Maggie Chapman	41
Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)	43
The Minister for Equalities (Kaukab Stewart)	44
Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con)	46
COLLEGES AND APPRENTICESHIPS	50
<i>Motion moved—[Murdo Fraser].</i>	
<i>Amendment moved—[Ben Macpherson].</i>	
<i>Amendment moved—[Lorna Slater].</i>	
Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con).....	50
The Minister for Higher and Further Education (Ben Macpherson)	53
Lorna Slater (Lothian) (Green)	55
Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab).....	57
Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD)	59
Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con).....	61
Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP)	62
Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con).....	64
Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab).....	66
Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP).....	68
Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab).....	70
Lorna Slater	70
The Minister for Business and Employment (Richard Lochhead)	73
Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)	75
SECURE ACCOMMODATION	78

Statement—[Natalie Don-Innes].

The Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise (Natalie Don-Innes)	78
CLIMATE CHANGE (SCOTLAND) ACT 2009 (SCOTTISH CARBON BUDGETS) AMENDMENT REGULATIONS 2025	90
The Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Energy (Gillian Martin)	90
Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con)	93
Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab).....	96
Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green)	98
Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD)	99
Michael Matheson (Falkirk West) (SNP)	100
Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con).....	102
Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland) (Lab)	103
Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)	104
Sarah Boyack	106
Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con)	107
Gillian Martin	109
BUSINESS MOTION	113
<i>Motion moved—[Graeme Dey]—and agreed to.</i>	
PARLIAMENTARY BUREAU MOTIONS	115
<i>Motions moved—[Graeme Dey].</i>	
Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con).....	115
The Minister for Parliamentary Business and Veterans (Graeme Dey)	115
DECISION TIME	118
BOWEL CANCER SCREENING	134
<i>Motion debated—[Edward Mountain].</i>	
Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con).....	134
Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)	136
Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con).....	138
Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab)	139
Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)	140
The Minister for Public Health and Women’s Health (Jenni Minto).....	142

Scottish Parliament

Wednesday 8 October 2025

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

Portfolio Question Time

Constitution, External Affairs and Culture, and Parliamentary Business

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Good afternoon. The first item of business is portfolio questions.

British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly

1. Annabelle Ewing (Cowdenbeath) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of its relations with the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly. (S6O-05026)

The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): The Scottish Government welcomes collaboration between Scottish parliamentarians and members of other Parliaments, including through the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly—known as BIPA. BIPA provides a useful platform for members of the Scottish Parliament to engage with counterparts across these islands. I thank Ms Ewing and the other Scottish members of BIPA for their contributions to that. I am particularly pleased to welcome the reconvening of the BIPA plenary, which will take place in Weybridge from 12 to 14 October.

The Scottish Government also places great value on our partnership with Ireland, as is seen in the Ireland-Scotland bilateral framework. The framework acknowledges the importance of BIPA in deepening parliamentary connections.

Annabelle Ewing: As the cabinet secretary rightly acknowledges, the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly plays an important role in bringing together parliamentarians from across these isles to debate the important issues of the day. Further to recent changes to its committee structure—which I would say is excellent—representatives of the devolved and other jurisdictions can now play a critical role in the work of the committees. Will the cabinet secretary undertake to contact the BIPA secretariat to reconfirm the Scottish Government's commitment to the assembly and, where appropriate, to offer support?

Angus Robertson: The new Ireland-Scotland bilateral framework 2025 to 2030 reasserts our commitment to BIPA. Specifically, it commits the

Scottish Government and the Irish Government to strengthening parliamentary links and recognising the role that the British-Irish Parliamentary Association plays in that regard, with regular contact between the Oireachtas and the Scottish Parliament. Although the framework itself will not be published until 26 November, we can give a supportive reply.

So, the answer is yes, I would be happy to undertake to contact the BIPA secretariat to reaffirm the Scottish Government's commitment to BIPA and to offer appropriate support.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): Regular co-operation with other Governments across the British Isles is vital. At the interparliamentary finance committee forum in March, 13 parliamentarians from 11 parties in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland met to discuss issues of mutual interest. However, the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, Darren Jones MP, offered only to appear virtually—which was eventually downgraded to a 15-minute slot. A freedom of information request showed his diary to be empty other than for work on the spending review that was then some 12 weeks away. Does the cabinet secretary share my concern, and that of other parliamentarians across the devolved Assemblies and Parliaments, that a United Kingdom minister seems to be happy to show devolved Administrations such casual disrespect?

The Presiding Officer: Please answer with regard to the substantive question.

Angus Robertson: First, I take the opportunity to publicly welcome Mr Jones to his role as Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister and Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, following the UK Government's latest reshuffle.

It is crucial that UK Government ministers engage meaningfully with devolved Governments and parliamentarians, especially in relation to the budget, given the impact that spending decisions at Westminster have on Scotland. Given that he now has responsibility for intergovernmental relations, I urge Mr Jones to pursue a good level of engagement with me and my ministerial colleagues, as well as with the Parliament and parliamentarians.

More broadly, the Scottish Government welcomed the UK Government's commitment to reset its relationships with the devolved nations; however, we have become increasingly concerned about the extent to which that relationship has truly been reset. Several high-profile problems in intergovernmental working have occurred over the first year of the UK Government's term. I hope that Mr Jones takes note of that and works to forge better collaboration, to ultimately benefit the people of Scotland.

The Presiding Officer: Question 2 has been withdrawn.

Libraries

3. Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to support libraries within local communities. (S6O-05028)

The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): The Scottish Government's targeted support for public libraries is made through our annual funding—which totals £935,000—to the Scottish Library and Information Council. It includes the public library improvement fund, which supports creative and innovative public library projects throughout Scotland. The successful PLIF projects for 2025-26 are due to be announced soon.

Through the school library improvement fund, we also provide targeted support—amounting to £150,000—to school libraries, in recognition of their important role in education. More generally, public library policy is devolved to local authorities, which means that our general revenue funding to councils also supports libraries across the country.

Fulton MacGregor: Coatbridge library and Chryston library are among the key community hubs in my constituency, and they now include digital zones, study spaces and community programmes. The third place idea is increasingly recognised by the Scottish Government through strategies on community wellbeing, place-based regeneration and digital inclusion. What steps is the Scottish Government taking to encourage the use of libraries such as the ones in Coatbridge and Chryston as community wellbeing hubs and social spaces for isolated or vulnerable groups?

Angus Robertson: I commend Mr MacGregor for his question. He is absolutely right: the Scottish Government recognises the vital role that libraries play as so-called third places—that is, welcoming, inclusive spaces that support wellbeing, digital inclusion and community connection. That is why we fund SLIC's public library improvement fund, which supports projects that blend culture, health, social impact and other factors. One such example is the return journeys programme to help underreached groups to reconnect with libraries, which I had the pleasure of seeing at first hand in Falkirk last year. It is a powerful example of how libraries in Scottish communities, such as the ones in Coatbridge and Chryston, are evolving into trusted wellbeing hubs.

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Libraries have been proven to boost literacy, particularly among children from disadvantaged backgrounds. At least 16 per cent

of public libraries in Scotland have closed since 2008, while a quarter of pupils entering secondary school struggle to read, write and count properly. Does the cabinet secretary accept that closing libraries cannot be improving children's literacy outcomes?

Angus Robertson: For the obvious reason that Mr Stewart set out, I am keen to support any place that helps with literacy and learning, but we must be open-minded with regard to new ways in which libraries can provide services to people young and old. I mentioned the potential role that libraries can play as so-called third places, to which people can go to support wellbeing endeavours and learn about digital inclusion and wider community connection, and I encourage Mr Stewart, his party and others across the Parliament to do what they can to help local authorities—which have the responsibility for the libraries in their areas—to adopt such an approach. I am sure that that will maximise the retention of the library network across Scotland, which is a goal that I support.

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): Access to libraries is hugely important for people of all ages, but it is of particular importance for our children and young people. Last week, *The Herald* reported that around one in 10 of Scotland's libraries have closed in the past decade on the Scottish National Party Government's watch. Many school libraries have also been cut as a result of the underfunding of our local councils.

The United Kingdom Labour Government recently pledged to ensure that every primary school in England will have a library. How can we improve literacy in Scotland when our libraries and our school libraries continue to be closed? What assessment has the Government undertaken of access to libraries for our children and young people?

Angus Robertson: I gently say to Mr Bibby that, in my initial answer, I gave quite a lot of detail on the level of support—both direct and indirect—that the Scottish Government provides to libraries. He will, of course, know that library provision is devolved to local government. If he is keen on financial support for libraries, he would have a little bit more credibility on the subject if, rather than abstaining in the budget vote or voting against it, as the Tories did, he had voted for the increases that have been provided to support libraries.

International Strategy

4. Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government, regarding the implementation of its international strategy, how and by what mechanisms it is engaging with the Governments of other European nations. (S6O-05029)

The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): The Scottish Government engages proactively with European counterparts through bilateral partnerships, multilateral forums and cultural diplomacy, which includes a busy programme of inward and outward visits. Through our network of international offices, which includes key European hubs in Berlin, Paris, Dublin and Copenhagen, along with Scotland houses in Brussels and London, we promote Scottish interests, build partnerships and attract investment. Maintaining close relations with our European neighbours is essential in helping to mitigate the damage of a Brexit for which Scotland never voted.

Clare Haughey: I thank the cabinet secretary for that answer. Scotland is demonstrating via that strategy that we are a country that is able and prepared to play its part as a member of the international community, and it is clear that countries want to engage with Scotland. Scottish Government offices are an essential component of that. How does the Scottish Government actively assess the reach of those offices and their importance in pursuing the Government's objectives and commitment to tackling global issues such as the climate emergency?

Angus Robertson: We have nine offices in our international network, most of which are hosted in the British embassy or high commission, alongside United Kingdom, Welsh and Northern Irish teams. We include Scotland House London in that network because it serves to engage the diplomatic community at the Court of St James's, as well as the global financial markets in the city. In my time as cabinet secretary for external affairs, I have had useful dialogue with the Constitution, Europe and External Affairs and Culture Committee on exactly the question of assessing reach and impact, and I was glad to accept its recommendation that we publish an annual report explaining how the work of those offices contributes to the goals of our international strategy. We will publish the next such annual report in the coming weeks.

Palestine (Humanitarian Assistance)

5. Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what representations non-governmental organisations have made to it regarding its work to support humanitarian assistance in Palestine. (S6O-05030)

The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): The Scottish Government receives regular updates from a number of humanitarian organisations regarding the on-going humanitarian

crisis in Palestine, including United Nations agencies such as UNICEF, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East and the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, the Disasters Emergency Committee and our humanitarian emergency panel members, which include the British Red Cross, Christian Aid, Islamic Relief, Mercy Corps, Oxfam, Save the Children, the Scottish Catholic International Aid Fund and Tearfund. We are also collaborating with Kids Operating Room to establish the Gaza HOPES—healthcare for obstetrics, paediatrics, emergency, and surgical care—field readiness hub in Dundee, which will support a rapidly deployable hospital in Gaza to provide essential surgical, maternity and paediatric services and support the longer-term recovery of the healthcare sector in Gaza.

Ruth Maguire: The global sumud flotilla is a coalition of everyday people who believe in human dignity and the power of non-violent action. All 42 boats in that historic mission were illegally intercepted while attempting to break Israel's siege on Gaza. Four hundred and sixty-two people were kidnapped in international waters, including Scottish citizens. Does the cabinet secretary share my dismay at reports of the terrible treatment of those humanitarians, and what representations has the Scottish Government made, either directly to Israel or through the United Kingdom Government, and what response has it received?

Angus Robertson: I begin my answer by paying tribute to the Scottish and international members of the humanitarian mission of the sumud flotilla. Scottish Government officials have been in daily contact with the UK Government's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, including over the weekend, seeking urgent clarification on repatriation arrangements for the residents of Scotland detained by Israel. The FCDO told us that it had lobbied the Israeli authorities to make clear that it expected the situation to be resolved safely, in line with international law and with due respect for the rights of those on board. All four residents of Scotland have now been deported from Israel, and at least one is back in Scotland, with three deported to Jordan. The FCDO told us earlier today that consular officials are supporting all British citizens who have been deported to Jordan.

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): In June, I asked the cabinet secretary to assure Parliament that no funding from the Scottish Government to UNRWA had been used or was being used to treat Hamas terrorists. His response suggested that he could not give that assurance, but that he was meeting UNRWA the next day and would raise my concerns with it. Did he raise those concerns with

UNRWA, and what assurances did it give him that Scottish taxpayers' money, as humanitarian aid provided by Scottish National Party ministers, was not used to treat Hamas terrorists?

Angus Robertson: First, I am sorry that the member could not find it in his heart to thank the UN agencies for providing humanitarian support in the genocide that is currently taking place in Gaza. Rather than casting shade—

Jamie Halcro Johnston: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I asked that question in June, and I did not get an answer then. I have made it very clear. I appreciate that the cabinet secretary would like to dance around, but I asked a fairly straightforward follow-up question.

Angus Robertson: The member did not even listen to the answer to the question before he raised a point of order.

I am not aware of any humanitarian aid being used in the way that Mr Halcro Johnston suggests. If I receive any reports of that, I will share them with him. I am sorry that he could not also take the opportunity, in his point of order, to condemn the genocide that is being waged against the people of Gaza, and the humanitarian situation there—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us ensure that we hear one another.

Parliamentary Business (Scheduling)

6. Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government, regarding its role in proposing the scheduling of parliamentary business, how it can help ensure that parliamentary time is used constructively for the remainder of this parliamentary session. (S6O-05031)

The Minister for Parliamentary Business and Veterans (Graeme Dey): The scheduling of parliamentary business is proposed by the Parliamentary Bureau, and it is for Parliament to agree to business motions.

In contributing to scheduling discussions at bureau, ministers take into account committee and plenary capacity, as well as Parliament's capacity, to support bills' progression. As with any final year of a session of Parliament, the period leading up to dissolution will be extremely busy, and there is a responsibility on all MSPs in all parties to ensure that we make the most effective use of that time.

For my part, I am happy to commit to working constructively across the chamber to ensure that we can make progress with all legislation that the Parliament has to consider. However, once the Scottish Government or a member introduces a bill, its timetable is for the Parliament to determine.

Meghan Gallacher: The minister will be aware that it has taken 53 months to get through more than 40 bills, yet Holyrood is now expected to get through more than 20 bills in just six months. If we want good, well-scrutinised legislation through a process that offers Opposition members and back benchers as well as Government members the time to debate it, that needs to be planned well in advance. It cannot come at the expense in particular of MSPs with young families and caring responsibilities, because that goes against the premise that the Parliament was to be family friendly.

Does the minister accept that he will need to relook at the matter and see whether bills will be able to progress all the way to stage 3? Alternatively, is it the case that MSPs will be sitting late into the night, which might not produce legislation that will be beneficial for the people of Scotland?

Graeme Dey: There is a lot in that, so—with your indulgence, Presiding Officer—I will take a bit of time to cover it all, because Meghan Gallacher posed an important question.

Our data suggest that there are no more bills or Scottish statutory instruments before Parliament than is normal at this point in a parliamentary session. We believe that committees are taking a little bit longer to scrutinise bills than in previous sessions, which has seen bill timetables slip across the session. There has also been an increase in the number of amendments being lodged by MSPs, which impacts the time that is required at stages 2 and 3. Lastly, some members' bills before Parliament are more complex and lengthy than has been the case in previous sessions, and that increases the time that is required for Parliament to scrutinise the detail.

I absolutely understand the frustration of members when business runs late on a regular or semi-regular basis, especially when it occurs at relatively short notice and has an impact on childcare, travel and the need to stay over.

The Parliamentary Bureau is very much alive to that, and I offer Meghan Gallacher the assurance that I and other business managers are doing all that we can to minimise the impacts. It is, however, very difficult to do that at times when there are large bills that attract huge numbers of amendments at stage 3, which—more often than not—are pressed to a vote.

The upcoming stage 3 proceedings on the Land Reform (Scotland) Bill are a case in point, as there are almost 400 amendments to be considered—in that instance, we have been able to give members advance notice. As I said, I offer the member an assurance that, where business managers can mitigate the impacts, they are seeking to do so.

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): The complexity of the timetable is driven by the complexity of legislation. The minister indicated that there is not a substantial difference in comparison with previous sessions. However, if we look at stage 2 proceedings, we see that there is a substantial difference in the time that the process is taking.

Will the minister reconfirm the Government's commitment to work with all members across the chamber at all stages of a bill to ensure that we can seek agreement early where it is available or identify where the differences actually lie?

Graeme Dey: I absolutely give that commitment. I cannot guarantee that the outcome of such discussions will satisfy the member's concern, but we have already seen many instances in which agreement on a way forward can be reached. If we are to manage the amending stages better and avoid scenarios such as Meghan Gallacher highlighted, it is absolutely imperative that members and the Government engage as early as possible and, hopefully, reach a satisfactory conclusion.

Commonwealth War Graves

7. Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what discussions the veterans minister has had with ministerial colleagues regarding the role of local authorities in maintaining Commonwealth war graves to a national standard. (S6O-05032)

The Minister for Parliamentary Business and Veterans (Graeme Dey): During my two spells as Minister for Veterans, I have had no engagement with ministerial colleagues regarding the role of local authorities in maintaining Commonwealth war graves to a national standard as it has not been raised with me, but I look forward to hearing the concerns that I suspect that Mr Mountain intends to bring to my attention.

Edward Mountain: There are nearly 1,500 war graves across the Highlands, spread over 192 graveyards, with veterans of the first and second world wars buried in them. Will the minister undertake to speak to his Cabinet colleagues to ensure that proper guidance is issued to local authorities regarding the upkeep of those graves? During my travels in the past 10 years, I have found too many war graves to be in very poor condition. In some cases, the gravestones are collapsing and have not been maintained to a standard that allows people to read the inscriptions on them.

Graeme Dey: I take the opportunity to place on record that I, like Edward Mountain, have enormous respect for the work of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. In

Scotland alone, it maintains in excess of 1,300 sites commemorating more than 21,000 casualties. It is even more to its credit that it prioritises repair over replacement in order to uphold the long-term integrity of those spaces and protect them as dignified places of remembrance.

I am very concerned to hear what the member has said and I am happy to explore it further with him. Beyond that, I am planning to arrange a gathering of local authority armed forces and veterans champions in due course and commit to include the issue on the agenda. I hope that, if we discuss the issue effectively, we can avoid the need to issue the guidance that the member has called for, but I am open to exploring the issue further with him in the aftermath of my meeting.

Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo (Overseas Tours and Performances)

8. Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how it supports the Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo in relation to its overseas tours and performances, in light of their reported contribution to the tattoo's reputation and economic impact in Scotland. (S6O-05033)

The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): I congratulate the Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo on its 75th anniversary, the success of the first show under new creative director Alan Lane, and the £750,000 in charitable giving that was provided during 2025. The Scottish Government-led brand Scotland partnership maximises domestic and international opportunities to promote Scotland. Through its work, we showcase the tattoo annually, amplifying its impact in Edinburgh during August and year round, alongside our other globally recognised festivals. Scottish Government officials will soon meet tattoo counterparts to explore further collaboration on international ambitions, building on previous partnership work such as tartan week and the Washington DC tattoo in the USA.

Gordon MacDonald: The Edinburgh military tattoo is a highlight of the Edinburgh festival season, drawing more than 200,000 attendees each year, with a significant proportion of international visitors from more than 100 countries. Does the cabinet secretary agree that, by boosting the global promotion of Scotland, the tattoo not only puts Scotland on the world map, but helps to boost tourism in Scotland?

Angus Robertson: VisitScotland works closely with the Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo to promote Scotland internationally, using the event's global profile to inspire overseas visitors to experience our culture and heritage. The collaboration is particularly valuable during the

tattoo's international tours and major showcases, such as tartan week in New York. The tattoo strengthens Scotland's reputation as a world-class events destination, helping to attract international audiences and drive sustainable tourism. Alongside our diverse portfolio of major arts and cultural events, it plays a vital role in promoting Scotland's creativity, landscapes and warm welcome to visitors from around the world.

Justice and Home Affairs

Legal Aid (Survivors of Domestic Abuse)

1. **Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what steps it is taking to improve access to legal aid for survivors of domestic abuse. (S6O-05034)

The Minister for Victims and Community Safety (Siobhian Brown): The Scottish Government continues to work closely with stakeholders to support victims and survivors of domestic abuse to get the support that they need. In addition to the current judicare system, under which all eligible costs are met, we provide grant funding to the Scottish Women's Rights Centre of £230,000 a year. We also fund public legal services through the Civil Legal Assistance Office and the Public Defence Solicitors Office, which can operate across a wide geographical area.

We are actively reviewing the legal aid framework to ensure that it is fair, accessible and responsive to the needs of vulnerable individuals.

Evelyn Tweed: Domestic abuse survivors in my constituency report great difficulty in finding legal aid solicitors. What steps is the Scottish Government taking to address barriers to access outside the central belt and, in particular, in rural areas?

Siobhian Brown: The legal aid system is generally effective in delivering help to those who need it. However, we recognise that there are some challenges in relation to certain types of case and certain locations. Although civil solicitors are mainly based in city centres, near to the courts, they have always covered a wide geographical area. I can reassure the member that solicitors in all parts of Scotland are able to access funding for work that is carried out under the legal assistance schemes, and those schemes are flexible enough to allow solicitors to travel to any part of the country to carry out work, should it not be possible to instruct a local agent.

That said, as part of the discussions around the criteria for a new traineeship fund, my officials are currently exploring whether there is a need to be specific in targeting geographical areas or types of case.

Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): Evidence heard by the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee has painted a shocking picture of the inability of survivors of domestic abuse to access legal aid. We have heard of survivors being denied legal aid because they were unable to provide figures for their household income, but how would someone know their household income when their abusive partner has complete control over their finances? What action is being taken to ensure that survivors have access to legal aid when they have no access to their own finances?

Siobhian Brown: As the member is probably aware, domestic abuse organisations are not allowed by law or regulation to hire lawyers to support women and children. However, the Regulation of Legal Services (Scotland) Act 2025, which was passed in May and which the member and the Conservatives did not support, will remove restrictions preventing charities, law centres and citizens advice bodies from directly employing solicitors to provide certain types of legal aid to some of the country's most vulnerable citizens.

In addition, the legislation will ensure that third sector organisations can directly employ legal professionals to undertake reserved legal services, such as those in cases involving domestic abuse.

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): Lawyers have said for some time that they are leaving the legal aid sector in significant numbers due to inadequate remuneration and an unsustainable working environment. In fact, many lawyers have said that the pendulum has swung so far that the lack of legal aid defence lawyers is creating a backlog that is impacting victims of sexual crime. As the minister will know, that is partly because those who are accused of sexual crimes must employ a lawyer.

I welcome the announcement of the training fund, but what other action is being taken and what progress is the Government making to stop lawyers leaving the sector that we so desperately need them to stay in?

Siobhian Brown: A lot of work is going on in that area. The member will know about our work on legal aid reform. We will not be able to pass legislation on that during this parliamentary session, but work is under way on it at the moment.

The Scottish Government is investing record levels of funding to support victims through a wide range of front-line services, including specialist legal advice. This year's budget was at a record high, with total legal aid fund investment of £165 million. The fund is demand led, so all eligible costs will be met, regardless of the cost.

Legal aid is available to victims of domestic and gender-based violence who are seeking protection through civil actions where they meet the statutory eligibility criteria. I appreciate that there are some challenges, and that is why I am working with the legal profession to move forward in conquering those challenges.

Violent Crime (Dundee)

2. Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government, in light of reports of rising levels of knife crime in Dundee over the summer, how it is supporting Police Scotland and local partners to prevent and reduce incidents of violent crime. (S6O-05035)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs (Angela Constance): Although it is of little comfort to victims, recorded crime in Dundee city has continued its downward trend, reducing by 3 per cent since 2021. That includes reductions in non-sexual crimes of violence and crimes of common assault.

We remain vigilant to the need to tackle any crimes of violence, which can cause devastation for families and communities. We are providing Police Scotland with increased funding of £1.64 billion this year, and we have invested £6 million in the implementation of the violence prevention framework over the past three years. This year, that includes up to £1.2 million for the Scottish Violence Reduction Unit and nearly £300,000 for the delivery of YouthLink Scotland's No Knives, Better Lives programme.

Michael Marra: The cabinet secretary is correct that that will be of little comfort to the people of Dundee. There has been a series of stabbings, murders and attempted murders in the city over recent months, which have hit the headlines and are creating a climate of fear for many residents.

Despite the cabinet secretary's claims, we know that the Scottish National Party is not supporting our police officers. On the SNP's watch, police officer numbers continue to fall—they are down 1,000 in the past decade. There are therefore 1,000 fewer officers on our streets to confiscate those offensive weapons, investigate crimes and keep us all safe.

Just yesterday, the general secretary of the Scottish Police Federation warned that Police Scotland is "at a crossroads", citing falling officer numbers and rising demands. David Kennedy said that the situation was simply "unsustainable". He is right, is he not?

Angela Constance: Let me, as always, put on record my appreciation of Scotland's police officers and police staff for the crucial job that they do in keeping our communities safe. I also say to

Mr Marra that I am very aware of the incidents that have taken place across Dundee in recent times.

On police numbers, although the deployment of police officers is a matter for the chief constable, our record funding has ensured that, since the start of 2024, Police Scotland has welcomed 1,500 new police officers to the rank and file. That is the biggest recruitment programme that Police Scotland has had since its establishment in 2013.

On resource in next year's budget, I will, of course, scrutinise that with the Scottish Police Authority, along with Police Scotland. My engagement on that matter has started. Public finances remain stretched, and the chancellor's recent spending review has taken us back to austerity. However, as always, we will do our very best for front-line services.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I have three requests for supplementary questions. I intend to get in all three, but they will need to be brief.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): Will there be any increase in Scottish Government support for the successful Medics Against Violence programme?

Angela Constance: We have committed more than £6 million to support a range of prevention and early intervention activities. That includes funding for Medics Against Violence, which has been awarded nearly £350,000 in this financial year, which is an increase on the previous year. That funding supports the delivery of work in our schools, including, for example, the provision of violence prevention messages to almost 5,000 pupils last year. It also supports the delivery of Medics Against Violence's very successful navigator programme across eight emergency departments, as well as the youth navigator service.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): Between April 2024 and March 2025, crimes involving knives and weapons in Aberdeen schools increased by 150 per cent. Since the beginning of 2024, more than 40 weapons have been seized in Aberdeen schools, including knives, blades and BB guns.

What action is the Government taking to prevent weapons from entering schools? Will the cabinet secretary encourage the roll-out of regular anti-weapons lessons?

Angela Constance: Mr Kerr is correct about the work that takes place in our schools to support good behaviour and to ensure that our children have the skills and resilience that they need to lead successful lives—successful, law-abiding lives. I will not repeat the information that the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills has frequently updated the Parliament on.

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): As the cabinet secretary said, the No Knives, Better Lives programme has been successful. It has been credited with helping to reduce the number of young people who have been convicted of handling knives by 85 per cent since 2008. However, despite a recent increase in knife crimes, there has been a 12 per cent real-terms reduction in the funding of No Knives, Better Lives since 2022. In the forthcoming budget, will the cabinet secretary look at the issue again, reinstate the funding and consider what further the programme can do?

Angela Constance: In relation to funding, we will of course look at all matters that support community safety. It is imperative to say that there is never any justification for any form of violence, and that includes the carrying of knives. Work with young people to emphasise that it is never safe to carry a knife and that there is absolutely no prestige in doing so is crucial.

Other work that is being funded by the Scottish Government via the Scottish Violence Reduction Unit includes the delivery of preventative education inputs in areas where violence is higher. That is a very targeted approach. The Scottish Violence Reduction Unit is, in partnership, developing a deterrence support package for the young people who are at the highest risk of such offending.

Age-of-sale Offences (Age-restricted Items)

3. **Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on legal enforcement measures being taken with regard to retailers committing age-of-sale offences when selling age-restricted items, such as vapes and cigarettes. (S6O-05036)

The Minister for Victims and Community Safety (Siobhian Brown): A range of age-restricted products exists in Scotland, with legislation specific to each of them.

In relation to tobacco and vapes, local authorities have powers to issue fixed-penalty notices to retailers and individuals who commit offences relating to the age of sale. Where premises are subject to more than three enforcement actions in a two-year period, the local authority may apply to court for an order banning the sale of tobacco and vaping products from those premises for up to 24 months.

Last year, trading standards officers with young volunteers attempted 662 test purchases of vapes and 251 test purchases of tobacco at premises across the whole of Scotland. In the 2024-25 financial year, 56 fixed-penalty notices issues

were issued for tobacco products and 217 for nicotine vapour products.

Daniel Johnson: I remind members of my entry in the register of members' interests.

The reality is that those powers are simply not being used to the degree that we would expect. In 2023-24, there were just 128 vapour product age-of-sale contraventions. That is an average of just 2.6 per local authority, and in the past two years there have been only seven applications for the court orders that the minister described.

Any member who looks at their mailbag will know that such sales are a scourge on our communities that needs to be clamped down on. I recently spoke to a constituent who had bank receipts and statements showing that her children had been buying vapes from a local shop. What we need is action. What will the Government do to shut down shops and use those powers to stop such sales? When will we see, instead of prevarication, evidence such as bank statements being used to take immediate action?

Siobhian Brown: I have had huge concerns about youth vaping and nicotine products over many years. Local authorities are responsible for enforcing the ban on single-use vapes. Trading standards officers have power to issue fixed-penalty notices of up to £800 for non-compliance. The Scottish Government provided £300,000 in additional funding to support local authorities in tackling that specific issue after the implementation of the ban on single-use vapes. In line with the principles of the Verity house agreement, that funding is not ring fenced. However, it is up to local authorities to determine how best to prioritise that work in line with local needs.

The member might be aware of the United Kingdom-wide Tobacco and Vapes Bill that is currently progressing through the parliamentary process. If passed, the legislation will introduce a range of restrictions—on age of sale, advertising, free distribution and retail register—that will also apply to such products.

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): We are seeing a worrying increase in the uptake of vaping among young people. Will the minister give an update on the current UK Government plans for the Tobacco and Vapes Bill and the consequential legislative consent memorandum, which fell before last year's election but if revived would see some control being introduced to the advertising and promotion of vaping products?

Siobhian Brown: The Scottish Parliament gave unanimous consent to the UK-wide Tobacco and Vapes Bill in May, and I am pleased that the bill is

expected to complete its passage within the current UK parliamentary session.

New powers in the bill will empower the secretary of state to regulate product features, packaging ingredients and flavourings of vapes in Scotland with the consent of the Scottish ministers. It will also introduce new restrictions on the advertising, sponsorship, free distribution and nominal pricing of vapes across the UK's four nations. I hope that that will help to prevent underage consumers from being targeted.

Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con): Retailers tell us that asking for proof of age can often be a trigger point for violence or abuse if the sale is refused, and that response times from Police Scotland are poor, if officers even turn up at all.

What communication has the minister had with Police Scotland on that? How many prosecutions have there been under the Protection of Workers (Retail and Age-restricted Goods and Services) (Scotland) Act 2021?

Siobhian Brown: I do not have details for how many prosecutions there have been—perhaps I could write to the member on that.

I engage quite frequently with retailers, who raised the issue with me prior to the introduction of the ban on single-use vapes in June. The Scottish Government is committed, through the new deal for business, to meet regularly the regulatory review group on the Tobacco and Vapes Bill. We will ensure that any impact of the proposals on business is fully understood and that policy implementation is effective and proportionate while delivering the beneficial outcomes for population health that are sought.

E-Bikes and Off-road Vehicles (Misuse)

4. **Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what action it can take to address the misuse of e-bikes and off-road vehicles, in light of reported concerns that it is a growing community safety issue. (S6O-05037)

The Minister for Victims and Community Safety (Siobhian Brown): We remain committed to working collaboratively with local authorities and Police Scotland through the road safety framework strategic partnership board. Earlier this year, I met several members of the Scottish Parliament to discuss concerns, which led to a summer safety awareness campaign.

Enforcement is a matter for Police Scotland, whose local teams are best placed to identify misuse and prevent future incidents. It is undertaking initiatives, including work with delivery companies.

Police funding has increased to a record £1.62 billion this year. We will continue to engage with the United Kingdom Government, which holds reserved powers over off-road vehicles, including licensing and regulation.

Bob Doris: I thank the minister for acknowledging meeting me and other colleagues on two occasions to explore the matter further. As the minister noted, the one tangible outcome was the summer safety awareness campaign that I had called for. However, many concerns remain, including my own that, when Police Scotland confiscates off-road vehicles and e-bikes for misuse—which often causes danger and damage and contributes to antisocial behaviour—vehicles are often returned with little consequence. That must change.

Will the Scottish Government review provisions in that area? Will the minister again meet me and colleagues to continue to progress the matter and a range of other matters, and so keep that partnership working alive?

Siobhian Brown: I will be happy—I am sure that Jim Fairlie will be, too—to meet members to keep the conversation alive.

We support Police Scotland and its partners in dealing with the misuse of vehicles. Across Scotland, police have seized 816 e-bikes and scooters in the past year, mainly on account of the rider having no licence or insurance. As I said, enforcement is a matter for Police Scotland, and local policing teams are best placed to identify misuse and work to prevent future incidents.

The road policing function of Police Scotland is leading on the development of new guidance on the organisation's approach to the returning of confiscated vehicles. I am keen to work with all interested MSPs to determine potential opportunities for further Government action, including approaches to the UK Government.

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): In response to my recent parliamentary question, in which I highlighted the criminality associated with e-bike use, the minister stated:

"Police Scotland is keeping its approach to the illegal use of e-bikes and e-scooters under review."—[*Official Report*, 17 September 2025; c 18.]

That does not help the victims of crime; it brings no confidence to communities that are plagued by these thieves; and neither does it say that we are serious about cracking down on the criminals or the antisocial behaviour associated with the use of e-bikes. I am respectful of the answer that the minister has just provided to Mr Doris, but will the Scottish Government finally provide the resources, guidance and training that Police Scotland needs to allow it to crack down on this sort of crime?

Siobhian Brown: I hope that the member appreciates that ministers have met members several times this year to tackle the issue. The issue is not being ignored. Police Scotland has a record £1.64 billion in its budget this year. As I said to Mr Doris, Police Scotland is doing on-going work on the confiscation of vehicles, and I hope that we will be able to update you at the next meeting.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Always speak through the chair.

The member who was due to ask question 5 is not present.

Prison Overcrowding (Suicide and Self-harm Prevention)

6. **Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD):** To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of any impact of sustained overcrowding in prisons on suicide and self-harm prevention. (S6O-05039)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs (Angela Constance): I recognise the profound impact that overcrowding is having on those living and working in our prisons. That is why I set out last week the immediate action on early release that we intend to take in response. The Scottish Prison Service and the national health service continue to prioritise prisoners experiencing heightened distress levels or thoughts of self-harm or suicide, and the SPS remains committed to meeting the mental health and wellbeing needs of those in its care.

The SPS is also working at pace on the overhaul of the “Talk to Me: Prevention of Suicide in Prison Strategy”. By understanding the high risk and complex environment of a prison, that improved strategy will enhance holistic support and, ultimately, save lives.

Liam McArthur: Since 2021, more than 4,000 incidents of self-harm have been reported in Scottish prisons, with more than 1,000 in the past year alone. At the same time, our prisons are operating at unsustainable levels of overcrowding, with reconviction rates remaining above pre-pandemic levels and remand numbers stubbornly high. If we are serious about reducing incarceration sustainably and avoiding the sort of emergency releases that we have had in recent months, we must ensure that prisoners have access to proper mental health support, which is vital to achieving rehabilitation and securing public safety.

Will the cabinet secretary give an update on the timeframe for replacing the suicide strategy, which was supposed to be replaced back in 2023? What progress has been made on boosting the mental

health experts who are present in our prisons around Scotland?

Angela Constance: Mr McArthur is correct to highlight and underscore that our rising prison population is the most critical operational and strategic challenge that is currently faced by our Prison Service. As recently highlighted by the Prison Governors Association, there is also a human cost to overcrowding. The member will recall the commitments that I made in response to the fatal accident inquiry recommendations and the statement that I made in Parliament in response to the deaths of Katie Allan and William Lindsay.

On the overhaul of “Talk to Me”, the final report from an independent specialist, Professor Towl, will be published in October. By the end of this calendar year, the Scottish Prison Service will publish its suicide prevention pathway.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 7 has been withdrawn. I can squeeze in question 8 if I have brief questions and succinct replies.

Problem Street Drinkers

8. **Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what actions Police Scotland is taking to deal with problem street drinkers. (S6O-05041)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs (Angela Constance): The Scottish Government is committed to tackling all forms of antisocial behaviour and recognises that community safety is a shared endeavour. Local authorities and Police Scotland have statutory duties to develop and share antisocial behaviour strategies and local policing plans that target and address local needs. Police Scotland is receiving record funding of £1.64 billion this year. Each local authority has its own set of byelaws determining where people can drink in public places.

Kevin Stewart: The issue of drinkers congregating and carrying out antisocial behaviour in city centre sites, including in Aberdeen, is becoming an ever-increasing problem. I recognise that it is an operational matter, but will the cabinet secretary consider asking Police Scotland to take a zero-tolerance stance in dealing with folk who are involved in street drinking and antisocial behaviour?

Angela Constance: I will certainly discuss with justice partners the best approach to take in those circumstances. I will be interested to hear more about where good practice exists and what the evidence tells us.

The member will of course be aware that local authorities and Police Scotland are under a legal duty to maintain a strategy to tackle antisocial

behaviour in their area. I will keep the member informed.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes portfolio questions on justice and home affairs. There will be a short pause before we move to the next item of business.

Illegal Immigration

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-19252, in the name of Russell Findlay, on stopping illegal immigration and recognising its impact on housing. I invite members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons now or as soon as possible.

14:51

Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): I am proud of Britain's long history of immigration. I am proud of the strength and richness of our diversity. I am proud of our culture—decent, welcoming, tolerant and respectful.

I am just back from our party conference in the great city of Manchester, where the writer Matthew Syed said of his father, an immigrant from Pakistan:

“He knew that this is perhaps the most meritocratic and least sectarian nation on earth.”

I value colleagues from a broad range of ethnic and religious backgrounds, including Kemi Badenoch, the first black leader of any major United Kingdom party, and Rishi Sunak, the first ever non-white Prime Minister.

Neither today, tomorrow or, indeed, ever will I accept lectures from Scottish National Party or other left-wing politicians who falsely accuse our party of xenophobia.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): Will the member take an intervention?

Russell Findlay: I would be delighted to do so if there is any guarantee of getting the time back.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We are tight for time. You will get some of it back, but not necessarily all of it.

Russell Findlay: Okay. I will take the intervention.

Daniel Johnson: I welcome Russell Findlay's comments about having a welcoming approach to people who come from other countries. However, would he endorse the statement that Robert Jenrick made at the weekend about walking in certain communities and seeing the complexions of people there? Would he support that comment?

Russell Findlay: What Mr Jenrick meant was that we want communities that are assimilated. We do not want people to be isolated or ghettoised. That is an entirely reasonable position to take.

For the sake of everybody understanding the position, I say loudly and clearly that talking about

immigration is not racist. We welcome people, such as Mr Syed senior, who arrive legally and who respect our freedoms of both speech and religion—those who want to work hard to build a better future for their families, and who cherish democracy, equality and the rule of law.

It is not racist to recognise that our country has failed in its fundamental duty to control its borders. Too many have come here illegally or have overstayed their welcomes. Too many are here not to give, but to take. Too many do not share, or even actively oppose, our country's values.

It is not racist to say that we should remove foreign killers, paedophiles and rapists from our country. It should not have to be said, but it is also not racist to say that countless women have been trafficked and enslaved into prostitution by evil criminal gangs.

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): Will the member give way?

Russell Findlay: It is not racist to want to stop the boats: a treacherous trade that claims lives and enriches gangsters.

I will take one more intervention, from Mr Stewart.

Kevin Stewart: Language in rhetoric is very important in this debate. What we heard from Robert Jenrick is not good, as far as I am concerned. Trying—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please be brief, Mr Stewart.

Kevin Stewart: Trying to brand all immigrants as criminals is wrong, too. Does the member accept that?

Russell Findlay: I will not even waste my time in attempting to address that point. Kevin Stewart needs to open his ears and listen up to what is actually being said.

Concerns are increasing in many Scottish communities. People can see that uncontrolled immigration is unsustainable. People know that foreign criminals should be sent packing. Those are not extreme positions, but the views of ordinary, mainstream Scotland—of sensible Scots who increasingly struggle to understand an out-of-touch, left-wing political class. People can see that unfettered immigration places increasing pressure on public services. Taxpayers who work hard but struggle to pay the bills while local services decline understand that. When SNP politicians accused Scots who are concerned about immigration of politicising the saltire, that was surely the day when irony died. To attack this debate—as I suspect many will do—will serve only to confirm how out of touch they really are.

I will say it again, loud and clear. The people in Scotland who have concerns about immigration are not racist. It is not racist to reject alien attitudes towards women or gay people. It is not racist to oppose cultural practices such as child marriage. It is not racist to expect or want immigrants to assimilate.

It is foolish and naive to nurture the idealistic notion that all immigration is good and welcome, yet in Scotland today, that is where many left-wing politicians appear to stand. Some of them want open borders. Some are blind to the misery of trafficked people. Some think that it is fine for migrants to leave a place of safety, such as France, to reach our shores.

We, the Scottish Conservatives, think differently. We believe that illegal migration is causing strain in our local communities and our nation's finances. That is why I endorse Kemi Badenoch's plan to withdraw from the European convention on human rights and deport those who come here illegally. That is the only credible way in which we can again take control of our borders. Those views are basic common sense. Such conversations are held around dinner tables, at football grounds, in community centres and in pubs.

I see the impact of mass migration on my home city of Glasgow, which now houses more asylum seekers than any other local authority area in the United Kingdom. Once an asylum seeker is granted leave to remain, they gain refugee status. At that point, they are the responsibility of the local council, which is required to house them, albeit only if they are categorised as priority need. However, the SNP abolished the priority need criteria in 2012. That means that every homeless refugee is entitled to a home in Scotland. In addition, 10 years later, in 2022, the SNP abolished what is known as the local connection rule. That means that those with refugee status do not need to have any local connection whatsoever to seek housing. Both of those SNP decisions have resulted in Scotland generally, and Glasgow specifically, becoming a prime destination.

Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention?

Russell Findlay: I am sorry, but I have no time remaining.

Glasgow declared a housing emergency two years ago and it has a mountain of debt, which stands at £1.6 billion and is rising. It is little wonder that Glasgow City Council leader Susan Aitken has suggested a pause on asylum seeker dispersals to Glasgow, while her SNP colleague concedes that the existing system risks damaging social cohesion.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You need to wind up.

Russell Findlay: I end by saying it loud and clear: the public purse cannot afford this. It is unsustainable. That is not racist. It is not far right. It is simply right.

I move,

That the Parliament believes that illegal immigration must be stopped because of the damaging impact on public finances and local communities; recognises that the Scottish Government's decision to suspend local connection rules in relation to homelessness provision back in 2022 has contributed towards attracting asylum seekers to Scotland at an unsustainable level, and calls on the Scottish Government to immediately reverse this decision.

15:00

The Cabinet Secretary for Housing (Màiri McAllan): I cannot say that I am pleased to open in this debate for the Government. The Conservatives brought a similar motion only four weeks ago, and on that day a number of contributions crossed the line. Today, they have taken the biscuit, frankly.

I start by appealing for care in the language that we use this afternoon. Whatever certain politicians do to characterise the situation, we are talking about people—people with hopes, people with aspirations, people who have suffered and human beings who should be treated with dignity and respect.

I will promptly address what are, flatly, errors in the Conservative motion. First, the Conservatives wilfully misuse the terms “illegal immigration” and “asylum seekers”, conflating two fundamentally different issues. The term “illegal migrant” is not only divisive and dehumanising; it is also inaccurate. People are not illegal. Seeking asylum is a right. In fact, it is the lack of safe routes to the UK that makes migration take irregular presentations.

Russell Findlay: Will the cabinet secretary take an intervention?

Màiri McAllan: I am not giving you one more second of our time.

Members: Oh!

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Speak through the chair, cabinet secretary.

Màiri McAllan: Secondly, the Conservatives misunderstand the rules on local connection. Let me explain those rules to them. The changes that were made in November 2022 only prevent a Scottish local authority from referring a homeless household to another Scottish local authority in which that household has a local connection. That was praised as giving homeless households the

choice that anybody else would expect. The change did not alter local connection rules for refugee households. As things stand, nothing prevents a Scottish local authority from referring a homeless refugee household back to parts of England and Wales in which that household has a local connection.

Russell Findlay: Will the cabinet secretary take an intervention on that point?

Màiri McAllan: I have already made it clear that I will not give the Conservatives a platform for one more moment—not on my watch. The Conservatives are wrong, they know that they are wrong, and they ought to stop spreading the mistruths.

There are pressures on our housing system, which are driven not least by the pressures on households and our economy after the years of Conservative chaos in Whitehall.

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): What about the SNP Government?

Màiri McAllan: The truth is that Mr Findlay's party allowed enormous asylum backlogs to build up while creating a hotels policy that allows people to languish. Now, a Labour Government is continuing to move through those applications far too quickly and without proper provision for settlement. In particular, I appeal to the UK Labour Government to implement proper move-on periods that do not create homeless refugees and for the process to be properly funded.

Scotland has some of the most protective anti-homelessness laws of any country. We have significantly added to them with the “ask and act” duties, which the Parliament has just voted for in passing the Housing (Scotland) Bill. We have also delivered more than 140,000 affordable homes in our time in Government. Although there is housing strain, I can say with absolute certainty that, in the face of a housing emergency, this Government will not be rolling back on the homelessness rights of a single person in Scotland.

Russell Findlay: Will the cabinet secretary take an intervention on that point?

Craig Hoy: Will the cabinet secretary take an intervention?

Màiri McAllan: In closing, while continuing to ignore the Conservatives' attempts for a greater platform, I want us to reflect on what has led us here—to the point where this right-wing nonsense has found itself in our national Parliament for the second time in a month, where mistruths on social media are read by thousands before we have the chance to correct them, and where politicians, journalists and institutions are repeating and thereby normalising unfounded suspicion, fear and hatred, which should never be normalised.

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): Will the cabinet secretary take an intervention?

Craig Hoy: Will the cabinet secretary stop grandstanding and take an intervention?

Màiri McAllan: All of that is happening to the extent that what we once knew as bigotry is being defended as free speech. The SNP knows what it is, we recognise what it is, and we will call it what it is. It is prejudice. It is intolerance. It is racism. *[Interruption.]*

Rachael Hamilton (Etrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): You cannot say that.

Sue Webber: Will the cabinet secretary take a factual intervention? We are trying to have a debate.

Màiri McAllan: It is all those things, because it has no basis whatsoever in fact. Conflating crime with migration, as the Conservatives do in this chamber, is simply not factual. Holding whole populations to account for the criminal actions of one individual is patently absurd. Suggesting that the far right are somehow defenders of the rights of women and children is utter nonsense.

We now—predictably—have Russell Findlay following Kemi Badenoch in backing leaving the ECHR, which would make the UK join Russia and Belarus as the only non-signatory countries. The ECHR promotes the rule of law and the protection of individuals. It represents the difference between barbarity and civilisation. It says that people have rights by virtue of being human alone, and we should be suspicious of anyone who tries to drag us from it.

I move amendment S6M-19252.5, to leave out from “believes” to end and insert:

“notes that the suspension of local connection referrals in 2022 did not change the rights of newly recognised refugees to choose where they settle in Scotland, nor did it prevent Scottish local authorities from referring households presenting as homeless to an English or Welsh local authority with which they have a local connection; reaffirms that Scotland is a welcoming nation to people fleeing persecution, seeking safety and who have been granted refugee status, ensuring that they can rebuild their lives in the country through the New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy; highlights action in Scotland to tackle homelessness and destitution, including new prevention measures in the Housing (Scotland) Bill, increased investment in affordable homes and the £4 million investment in homelessness prevention pilots, alongside the extension of rapid rehousing transition plan funding of £8 million into 2026-27, and calls again on the UK Government to urgently uphold the European Convention on Human Rights, 1951 Refugee Convention and 1967 Protocol.”

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I remind members, although I do not think that it should be necessary, that it is up to the person who has the floor to decide whether they will take an intervention. It is up to members whether they

request interventions, but if I determine that those requests are simply an attempt to barrack, I will step in.

15:05

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): Once again, the Conservatives have brought this issue before the Parliament not to offer solutions, but simply to replay what they think are their greatest hits. In reality, this Tory debate is political hypocrisy of the worst kind. The Conservatives are trying to seize political capital from the wreckage of a chaotic immigration system that they designed, presided over and, ultimately, broke. Moreover, they are not doing it make improvements to a single person’s or community’s life; the only reason for it is that they are terrified of political extinction at the hands of Reform next May.

Under the previous Tory Government at Westminster, net migration quadrupled in four years to nearly 1 million, despite repeated promises to reduce it to under 100,000. The Tories gave us record net migration, record small boat arrivals and thousands of people stuck in more than 400 asylum hotels across the UK, waiting endlessly for their claims to be processed with no hope of resolution.

Craig Hoy: If the Labour Government is taking the issue seriously, why has the number of small boats arriving on UK shores doubled since you came to office?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Through the chair, please.

Mark Griffin: The member should pay attention to the latest figures, which came out in September. I cannot believe that Mr Hoy would again come to the chamber and talk about immigration, given the absolutely woeful performance by the Tories: 1 million despite a promise of 100,000. The Tories’ record is appalling, and their aim is purely to escape the annihilation that they are expected to receive at the hands of Reform next May. Gimmick responses were all that they offered at a UK level, and it is the exact same with their response here.

In Scotland, the housing emergency is deepening on the SNP Government’s watch. Let me be absolutely clear, however, that refugees entering the homelessness system are not the cause of the housing crisis; the system is broken because the SNP Government has not built enough homes. In the year to September 2025, the number of housing completions fell, as did the number of housing starts. Private sector completions have been at their lowest level since 2018. In the social sector, the number of completions dropped to its lowest level since 2017 from an already low base last year.

Kevin Stewart: Will Mr Griffin give way?

Mark Griffin: I am sorry, but I only have four minutes in which to make these points.

This year, social housing starts in Scotland were at their lowest level since we started collecting the data, in 1997. Those figures are from September this year.

Meanwhile, around 220,000 people are waiting for a social home. There are more children in temporary accommodation in Glasgow than there are in the whole of Wales, yet the SNP Scottish Government still had to be dragged into accepting that we are in the middle of a housing emergency.

Make no mistake: the SNP Government uses immigration as a political tool just as much as the far right does. The only difference is in who it decides to blame.

Looking at the evidence, it is painfully clear that none of the other parties is interested in offering solutions for those who are trapped in housing need. One party virtue signals and one dog whistles, and now they both point fingers and stir division in service of their own political goals. They stay very quiet about the fact that their Governments created this mess. While the Tories have chosen political amnesia and rank hypocrisy, the SNP waves flags when it should be building homes.

We cannot vote for either the motion or the Government's amendment. We cannot vote for Tory hypocrisy or SNP complacency. Since the present UK Government was elected, the number of asylum decisions has doubled and the backlog has fallen by a quarter. Labour is fixing the broken system, driving down the numbers and restoring fairness, and we will build homes at a record level. A Scottish Labour Government would deliver a new direction. We would prioritise building homes, properly funding local authorities and addressing this crisis.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You need to conclude.

Mark Griffin: We would serve all Scots, new and old, with the dignity and fairness that they deserve.

I move amendment S6M-19252.4, to leave out from "because" to end and insert:

"; regrets that the previous UK Conservative administration left the immigration system in a state of collapse; recognises the progress made by the UK Labour administration to clear the backlog of asylum claims, and believes that the failure to tackle the challenges facing Scotland's local authorities, public services and housing system, for which the Scottish Government has devolved responsibility and has received record levels of funding from the UK Government, is the root cause of the housing emergency."

15:10

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland)

(Green): This motion is one of the most shameful pieces of political theatre that we have seen in the chamber for some time. It is steeped in cruelty, ignorance and xenophobia. It attempts to pit neighbour against neighbour and to scapegoat refugees for a housing crisis that is the direct result of decades of political choices—choices made by Conservative and other UK Governments that have imposed austerity, underfunded public services, deregulated housing and allowed landlords and developers to profit while ordinary people have struggled to find a safe home.

Let us be absolutely clear: there is no such thing as an illegal human being. Seeking asylum is a human right, protected in international law—Russell Findlay would do well to remember that—by the 1951 United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, which the UK helped to draft and which it is legally bound to uphold.

Russell Findlay: Will the member take an intervention?

Maggie Chapman: No.

People fleeing persecution, war and disaster do not lose their humanity when they cross a border. They are exercising their right to seek sanctuary, yet the Tory motion treats them as a problem to be stopped—as if people escaping conflict and trauma are somehow responsible for the state of Britain's public finances or local housing systems. What a grotesque distortion of reality that is.

We know why people are coming here. Many are here because of wars and crises that the UK has helped to create or to fuel through its foreign policy, arms sales and decades of imperial intervention that have destabilised regions and destroyed lives. To now turn around and demonise those very people for seeking safety is the height of moral hypocrisy.

Scotland has long prided itself on being a place of welcome and a country that believes in compassion, solidarity and justice. New Scots have contributed so much to our culture, our economy, our national health service, our universities and our communities. Refugees are doctors, carers, teachers, artists, friends and family members. They enrich our nation in every possible way, every single day.

The Conservatives' attempt to connect the suspension of local connection rules to the so-called unsustainable levels of asylum seekers in Scotland is dishonest and divisive. Let us remember why those rules were suspended: it was to make sure that people experiencing homelessness could access accommodation wherever they were without being trapped by

bureaucratic borders. It was an act of fairness and solidarity. It prevented people from being abandoned when they were in crisis simply because of an administrative line on a map.

If Scotland is seeing rising homelessness, that is because of Westminster's austerity, Scotland's constrained housing budgets and a failure by successive Governments to build public and affordable homes. It is because housing has been treated as a commodity, not a human right.

Let us also be clear that the so-called hostile environment—a policy that was deliberately designed to make life unbearable for immigrants—has directly forced thousands into poverty, destitution and homelessness. That cruelty is not accidental; it is intentional and shameful. It is also the logical outcome of Tory ideology—an ideology that dehumanises immigrants and blames them for problems that stem from decades of political failure in this country.

This Parliament should stand up and reject the motion outright. We must refuse to be dragged into the gutter of xenophobia. We must insist that our response to global displacement be one of humanity, dignity and shared responsibility. Instead of building walls and stirring fear, let us build homes. Let us build communities that are strong because they are compassionate, inclusive and just. That is what Scotland can and must be.

15:14

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): It is interesting to watch the body language of the members on the Conservative benches. I know that many members over there are very uncomfortable with the approach taken by their leader. They are right to be uncomfortable with his approach: Russell Findlay made no attempt to justify his motion. He provided no evidence that the so-called change in the rules in 2022 is attracting people to Scotland.

Russell Findlay: Could Willie Rennie explain why Glasgow has a record 7,500 homelessness applicants?

Willie Rennie: In that intervention, too, Russell Findlay made no attempt to draw a connection between the change in the rules and the number of homelessness applicants in Glasgow or anywhere else in Scotland. Why did he pick on Glasgow? The rules were changed throughout Scotland.

Russell Findlay: Will Willie Rennie give way?

Willie Rennie: No. I am taking only one intervention.

I do not think that people on the streets of Kabul are celebrating the change in the rules on local

connection for housing allocation policy in Scotland. They do not see that as a magnet. What Russell Findlay said is a complete exaggeration. He tried to draw attention to the fact that there has been a change in the rules, which he said is resulting in mass immigration in Scotland, but that is simply not the case.

However, we must accept that the UK asylum system is in crisis. I see what other people see. I see the hotels and the expense.

Craig Hoy: Will the member take an intervention?

Willie Rennie: No.

I see the boats. I see the pressure on public services. I see that the people we are talking about are not working—we do not allow them to work. I see all those things, along with the fact that many people are struggling to make ends meet, because their bills are going up and the cost of heating their homes is going up. I see all the challenges that people face, but we need to come up with practical measures to solve the problem instead of just hyping up the rhetoric, because that does not solve anything.

I think that we should declare the situation a national emergency. We need to have new processing centres that are independent of the Home Office, to put new energy into the processing of applicants.

The Conservatives should have a degree of humility, because we know that it was the Conservatives who created this crisis during their many years in government. The fact that the hotels are so full is down to the Conservatives. The fact that there are so many boats coming across the Channel is down to the Conservatives. Because of the rules that they set in place, asylum seekers are not able to work. All of that is Conservative policy.

Russell Findlay did not talk about the detail; he just wanted to engage in the rhetoric of generalisation and exaggeration. Not all asylum seekers are criminals.

Russell Findlay: Will Willie Rennie take an intervention?

Willie Rennie: No.

Not all asylum seekers are paedophiles. The generalisations that Russell Findlay made this afternoon demeaned him as much as they demeaned his party.

Whatever terminology we use—asylum seekers, migrants or illegal migrants—it is important to say that they are all people. I do not think that we heard that once from Russell Findlay. They could be my brother, my sister, my sons, my mother or my father. They could even be me. In any other

circumstance, any one of us could be in that position. When we use such generalised language and such exaggeration, we dehumanise every single one of them. Russell Findlay knows that that is the truth, and that is why he is refusing to engage on the substance of the issue.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I appreciate that emotions are running high. However, members need to be careful about their language not only when they are making a speech and their microphone is on, but when they want to make an intervention and it is not taken. That is not an opportunity for them to start bad-mouthing members across the chamber.

We move to the open debate.

16:18

Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): I put it on record that I am pleased that the Scottish Conservatives managed to secure a debate on the important issue of illegal immigration.

Immigration has brought many benefits to Scotland. Many of our doctors, nurses, teachers, police officers and firefighters are immigrants or come from immigrant backgrounds. The fabric of our society has been made with the help of diverse communities.

I am the proud daughter of immigrants. My parents moved to the United Kingdom from India with hopes of securing a better future. They embraced British values and loved the new country that was now their home. They worked hard and asked for nothing in return. My late father taught me the importance of developing a strong work ethic and paying into the system.

I point out to the SNP that there is a world of difference between legal and illegal immigration. No matter what the SNP might think, illegal immigration is wrong. Our country is not a hotel. That is not a fringe belief—I am speaking on behalf of my community.

I would like to provide members with some facts. Almost 89,000 asylum applications for more than 111,000 people have been made in the past year, and 50 per cent of those arrived by irregular routes such as small boat crossings, in lorries and even in shipping containers. Glasgow City Council alone houses more asylum seekers than any other local authority in the UK. What surprises me is that the majority of those arriving on our shores are adult males.

That does not come without a cost to the public purse. Taxpayers are spending £250 million a year to house asylum seekers in Scotland, which amounts to around £41,000 per person. Hard-working Scots want to know where that money is going, given that Scotland is facing a housing

emergency. It is shameful that the SNP's decision to suspend local connection rules to homelessness provision has contributed to attracting asylum seekers at an unprecedented level.

It is not only about costs. We all know that migrants bring different cultural backgrounds. Some embrace British values with ease, but let us not be naive—some cling on to their so-called values, which too often include appalling attitudes towards women. As a lifelong advocate for women and girls, I will never accept that. Every time I stand in the chamber, I will raise my voice to defend the rights and safety of women and girls.

I am speaking on behalf of my community. I have knocked on thousands of doors in West Scotland. It might be a newsflash for the SNP that one of the top priorities that people ask about is what we are going to do about illegal immigration. Poll after poll has shown us that, but SNP ministers have chosen to bury their heads in the sand. They are not living in reality, and they are ignoring the public's concerns.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You need to conclude.

Pam Gosal: We cannot ignore or turn a blind eye to illegal immigration. The duty falls on us all. The SNP must wake up, see what is happening and take the necessary steps.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We have no time in hand, so members will need to stick to their speaking time allocations.

15:23

Jamie Hepburn (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP): I rise to speak with some disappointment. The Tories' current position has not always been their position, but their use of the discourse that we are hearing seems to be increasing.

I oscillate between a sense of indignation and disappointment. I will try to confine my remarks to the disappointment, but I will first speak to the amendment in the name of Màiri McAllan, which I support. I will not speak about it for too long, but I observe that it is rooted in fact, and for that reason alone, we should all support it.

The suspension of local connection rules for housing referrals in 2022 did not change the context of the rights of newly recognised refugees. I emphasise the term "refugee" because it is utterly absent from the Tory motion. I do not think that I have heard that term uttered once by members on their benches.

Russell Findlay: Will the member give way?

Jamie Hepburn: No, I will not give way, because we have heard enough from Mr Findlay today.

The context for those who are seeking to live in places such as Glasgow and other parts of this country is that they have had their claim for asylum recognised—they are no longer asylum seekers, and it is important that we get that on the record.

If members do not want to take my word for it, I refer them to Shelter Scotland’s briefing, which says:

“Recent debates around homelessness, the asylum system and refugee rights have regrettably led to misinformation being widely shared, specifically on local connection ... In law, refugees have never been deemed to have a local connection on leaving asylum accommodation, and they have always been able”

—I stress, they have always been able—

“to apply to any council in Scotland. This has not changed.”

The amendment in the name of Màiri McAllan is, therefore, factually correct.

I want to speak to the nature of the debate. The discourse that we have in Parliament is important, because it can impact the discourse outside Parliament. I absolutely recognise the right of each and every party to lodge any motion that it wants to debate in this place, but it is interesting that we have before us today a motion from the Tories the very first part of which relates to reserved subject matter. We are always being told that we should not be debating reserved subject matter in this place, but it seems that that rule can be dropped when it suits certain parties.

It was interesting to hear from Russell Findlay. I agree with him that it is not racist to talk about immigration, but the terms on which we talk about it matter; they are important—

Russell Findlay: Will the former minister take an intervention?

Jamie Hepburn: In that sense, the terms of the Tory motion are found wanting—

Russell Findlay: Will the member take an intervention?

Jamie Hepburn: There is a deliberate conflation in the terminology—

Russell Findlay: Will the member give way—yes or no?

Jamie Hepburn: No, Mr Findlay. I think that I have been pretty clear that I am not giving way to Mr Findlay.

There is a deliberate conflation in the motion of the terms “illegal immigration” and “asylum

seekers”; I think that that has been done on purpose.

I also commend to colleagues the submission from the Scottish Refugee Council, which says:

“Parliamentarians should set an example for the public when it comes to both challenging misinformation and avoiding the use of harmful misleading language.”

It says that it is

“disappointed to see this motion in the name of the Scottish Conservatives peddle the false link between people claiming asylum and illegal immigration.”

I agree with Willie Rennie: there are members who sit on the Conservative benches, and who are not here today, who will be deeply embarrassed by the terms of the debate that their party has brought to the chamber. I have served in the Parliament for 18 years, with David McLetchie, Annabel Goldie and Ruth Davidson as leaders of the Conservative Party. I did not always agree with them, but I do not believe for a minute that they would have lodged the motion that is before us today. The Tories should be utterly ashamed at their descent into Reform UK nonsense.

15:27

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): Last week, I took part in “Debate Night” in Dundee, and the issue that most people were concerned about was illegal immigration and the impact on our communities.

Let us clear one thing up straight away: people being concerned about illegal immigration does not mean that they are far right or racist, as the whole woke left-wing ideology in this place tries to make out—we heard that nonsense again today from the cabinet secretary. It means that they care about how public services are going to be paid for; how our hospitals, schools and housing will cope with additional unplanned pressures; and how our local authorities can afford to keep local services running while spending more and more on the problems that arise from illegal migration.

Those are genuine concerns that cannot be brushed under the carpet, and that is why people out there are angry. We have to listen and understand, and acknowledge the anger, not simply dismiss and ignore it as every other party in the chamber wants to do. We have protests in our towns and cities, councils rocked by divisions, and financial detriment to our citizens, all fuelled by a lack of understanding and direction from this out-of-time Administration.

Daniel Johnson: Will the member give way?

Douglas Lumsden: I do not think that I have time, Mr Johnson—sorry.

I recognise that control of immigration is a reserved issue, but we must all play our part. The SNP Government has created pull factors for asylum seekers coming to Scotland. Removing the local connection rule in particular has meant that it is much easier for asylum seekers to come to a particular local authority, and has created undue pressures on authorities such as Aberdeenshire and Aberdeen City Council.

Kevin Stewart: Will Mr Lumsden give way?

Douglas Lumsden: I am sorry, Kevin Stewart, but members on your front bench would not take interventions, so I am not going to take any interventions from you.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Through the chair, members.

Douglas Lumsden: The Labour Government in Westminster is, of course, equally culpable, as the numbers arriving have been increasing exponentially over the past year, mostly in dinghies and—I say this to Maggie Chapman, so that she knows—not from war-torn countries, but from France.

More should, and must, be done by all Governments by working together, not by stoking petty grievances. Solutions can be developed only in partnership, through a cross-UK approach. The SNP, with its constant refrain of independence, is hurting the opportunities for co-ordinated action. There should be one message from all Administrations in the UK.

Billions are being spent on asylum hotels, which means that less money is available for the devolved Administrations. Money is being spent on taxis to shuttle asylum seekers to doctors' appointments, which means that there is less money to spend on education. Decisions made by the Government have an impact on our communities. Offering things for free has a cost. Nothing is free; everything is paid for by hard-working Scots through their taxes. Only the Conservative Party has a commonsense approach to controlling immigration in our country. Only the Conservative Party has taken a whole-UK approach, understanding that the solution can be found only by working together.

Refugees should not find it easier to get accommodation in Scotland than in England. Scottish local authorities should not be under greater pressure to deliver accommodation than our neighbours in England, because we simply cannot cope. We have a housing emergency and the SNP is adding to it with the open-door policy that it is pursuing. Hard-working families cannot get on the housing ladder and they see people from other parts of the country jump to the top of the list. Local connection rules that were abolished should be reinstated and emergency policies that

were adopted during Covid to house asylum seekers in hotels should be dropped. Our communities demand more and better, and it is time that the SNP Government listened to people's concerns and stepped up or got out of the way.

15:31

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests: I own a share in a family home.

This is a difficult debate, whose premise is absolutely wrong. It reeks of hypocrisy and opportunism. As Mark Griffin said, the Conservatives are using the debate for their own ends. It was the Conservatives who collapsed the asylum system and spent £700 million of taxpayers' money to deport only four volunteers. Once again, they are trying to sow division and conflate illegal immigrants with asylum seekers and refugees, blaming those groups for draining public service coffers. In reality, those groups, such as foreign nationals who have been trafficked and abused or who are here without any legal status, are often left without help and with no safety net. They have no recourse to public funds—

Russell Findlay: Will the member take an intervention?

Rhoda Grant: No, I do not have time.

It seems to me that, when things go wrong, the first response of those who should be taking a share of the blame is to deflect and blame somebody else. Our grandparents fought wars to stop the rise of nationalism and discrimination. Surely it cannot be hard to see the parallels with what is happening today, where foreign nationals—and many people of colour—are being blamed for the crisis that we face. While our grandparents fought those wars, the people who were left at home provided asylum and refuge for those who were persecuted.

Yes, there is a housing crisis, but it is not the fault of asylum seekers. It is the fault of Government decisions. It is about a lack of investment from the previous Tory Government—and the Tories now have the brass neck to have lodged the debate. It is about the lack of investment from the SNP Government, which has squandered capital rather than invest in homes. There is no doubt that the SNP has fanned the flames of a housing emergency because of its failure to meet its house-building targets. That is especially the case in rural areas. On top of that, there are cuts to council funding and public services. Those are the real causes of the challenges that we are now facing.

In the Highlands and Islands, we desperately need inward migration. The health service is recruiting from abroad. It has campaigns in Holland and is actively recruiting in Africa. The Scottish Government's lack of workforce planning is complicit in the challenges that our health boards are facing. The health boards should be training staff to work in the NHS and care service. We should not be poaching staff from other countries that invest in training.

Although NHS Highland is trying to recruit from elsewhere, that has not been the answer to the problem. Frequently, it recruits, but those recruits cannot take up the posts because they cannot find somewhere to live. That is because all the homes have been bought as holiday homes for wealthy people who can afford two homes. Others are used as holiday lets and are often owned by people who have no connection whatsoever to those communities. There should be a ceiling on the number of second homes and holiday homes that any community is asked to support. However, the only answer to the housing crisis is to build more homes—homes that are affordable for local people and which cannot be sold on as second homes and holiday homes.

We all know what the debate is about. It is about placing the Conservatives to the right of Reform, but bringing forward debates that have no basis in reality is not the way to do it. It simply sows division and makes our country more dangerous.

We all have responsibilities as politicians, and we should use this time in our Parliament wisely.

15:35

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): I can understand why folk are frustrated at the moment, as we are several years into a cost of living crisis. However, there is consensus that—I have tried to word this very carefully—there are far too many asylum seekers living in hotels. That is the case, but this is where we differ. First, there is an easy way to reduce the number of asylum seekers, which is to process their applications more quickly and better. That would have the knock-on effect of allowing folk the chance to start rebuilding their lives, to get jobs and to find a community to settle in and become a part of. It also means that they are not spending months or even years in hotels.

I do not blame the people who are fleeing war and persecution for claiming asylum. I do not think that upholding international law or showing compassion is a bad thing, and I do not think that asylum seekers are the ones responsible for every problem in society today—I usually blame such things on the Tories, and I think that I am usually right to do so.

Right now, the asylum system is broken—I blame the Tories for breaking that too, by the way, although I think that Labour could be doing a better job of trying to fix it. For years, there have been far too few resources available to process applications, and losing the Dublin system following Brexit made that worse—Brexit, of course, being the gift that just keeps on giving since the last time a UK Government tried to appease Nigel Farage.

The system is broken as a consequence of trying to save a few quid on decision makers, and now we are spending fortunes on accommodating folk in hotels. I can understand why folk are angry about that, but I think that the Tory motion is particularly disgraceful, because it is trying to turn that anger against some of the most vulnerable folk in the country.

The divisive language and the misinformation that we have heard are outrageous. Seeking asylum is not illegal. It is a fundamental human right that is protected by international law. On the subject of misinformation, I will read out a bit of Shelter Scotland's briefing for last month's debate on a Tory motion on asylum seekers:

"Recent debates around the asylum system, refugee rights and homelessness have regrettably led to misinformation being widely shared. This has been particularly true of local connection legislation, which was suspended with parliamentary approval in 2022, during this parliamentary session. These changes to local connection legislation are completely unrelated to the issue of refugee homelessness—the changes did not alter rules for whether people recently granted refugee status can move to Scotland from elsewhere in the UK, or between Scottish local authorities. Those leaving the asylum system are not deemed in law to have formed a local connection to any area, and thus have always been able to move to a local authority of their choosing."

I wonder whether Mr Findlay bothered to read that briefing or whether he just decided to double down anyway.

I am nearly out of time, so let me finish with a clear message. Refugees are welcome in Scotland. I say to refugees, wherever you are from—be that Ukraine, Syria, Afghanistan or elsewhere—if you have fled war or persecution, we will help you to rebuild your lives in Scotland as we work to build a better Scotland for everyone living here.

Let us focus on fixing the system and not blaming the folk trapped in it. Let us continue to send out a clear message that Scotland is a welcoming country.

15:39

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Reform): I will start by apologising to Russell Findlay, because I actually agree with him on

something—talking about immigration is not racist. However, I have to say that the Conservatives have quite some nerve bringing this issue to the chamber for a second time, given their record in office. After more than a decade in government, they presided over record levels of net migration—nearly 700,000 last year—

Russell Findlay: Will the member take an intervention?

Graham Simpson: Despite the promise by Rishi Sunak to stop the boats, the Conservatives failed to do so. This the party that gave us the Boris wave of immigration.

Russell Findlay: Will the member take an intervention?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Findlay, resume your seat.

Graham Simpson: Far from curbing immigration, the Conservatives increased it. The voters will not be fooled by this apparent about-turn today.

Labour's record is no better. Under Keir Starmer, Labour offers tough rhetoric but weak results. The number of small boat crossings continues to rise, with up to 1,000 boats a day arriving on UK shores.

Then we come to the SNP. Scotland has become a magnet for migrants, which can be attributed to policy decisions taken here. It is putting a strain on public services and community cohesion.

I go back to my main point that the public will not be fooled by the parties that gave us the problem. We need a Government that is serious about securing our borders, restoring integrity to the system and ensuring that immigration works for Britain, not against it.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to the closing speeches.

15:41

Maggie Chapman: Over the course of the debate, we have heard some of the same tired toxic rhetoric from the Conservatives—language that tries to divide, to sow fear and to cast desperate people as threats to our society. However, the truth remains: people who are seeking safety are not the cause of our housing crisis nor of our fiscal challenges; they are the victims of those crises. Those crises have been created and perpetuated by the same Conservative Governments that now want to wash their hands of responsibility.

Russell Findlay listed things that he claims are not racist, but it is racist to blame an entire group

of people for the issue that his UK Government created, it is racist to spread misinformation and cause fear and alarm by saying that migrant gangs are going to murder children in schools, and it is racist to spit on people in the streets just because of the colour of their skin. I have witnessed all of the above and more by Tories or other far-right groups in this chamber and on the streets of Aberdeen and Dundee, where I have been proud to stand in solidarity with other community members and anti-fascists against the racist anti-immigrant protests.

Let us be clear: the lack of affordable housing in Scotland and across the UK is not caused by refugees. It is caused by decades of political neglect, by treating homes as investment vehicles for the wealthy instead of as places for people to live, by allowing rents to spiral and social housing to vanish, and by the cuts to local authority budgets imposed by Westminster that have hollowed out the very services that support people in crisis.

If there is anything unsustainable here, it is the cruelty of a system that spends millions on detention, deportation and militarised borders rather than on ensuring that every person, regardless of where they were born, has a safe place to call home.

Scotland can do better. Scotland is doing better by choosing compassion over cruelty, inclusion over fear. The decision to suspend local connection rules was a decision rooted in fairness to ensure that someone who found themselves homeless could seek help wherever they were, and not be shunted between councils like a parcel that no one wanted to open. That is not unsustainable; that is humane.

What is unsustainable is the UK Government's callous immigration policies that perpetuate the hostile environment that forces people into destitution and criminalises compassion. What is unsustainable is the failure to create regular safe routes for asylum, leaving people at the mercy of traffickers and dangerous crossings.

The Parliament must not legitimise racism and division. We should not allow the Tories to redefine compassion as weakness, or solidarity as threat. We must stand firm in our commitment to international law, to the 1951 refugee convention and to the principles of justice and humanity that underpin it.

Let us remember who we are speaking about: people who have fled persecution, torture and war; mothers protecting their children; students who want to learn; engineers; nurses; artists; dreamers; and new Scots who bring strength, creativity and courage to our communities.

The answer to the challenges that we face is not to close our doors but to open them wider and to build a Scotland where everyone belongs and where every person has the right to safety, dignity and a home. Scotland's strength lies in its compassion and that compassion is never a weakness; it is our power.

15:45

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab) :

This is a tough debate to sum up. It has not been terribly edifying. Willie Rennie was absolutely right—in some ways, we can sum up the debate by referring not to words but to the awkwardness, the body language and confected outrage that we have watched across the chamber.

The only thing that I disagree with Willie Rennie on is that it is not just the people who are standing behind Russell Findlay who look awkward; Russell Findlay himself looks deeply awkward—

Russell Findlay: Will the member take an intervention?

Daniel Johnson: If you think—if Russell Findlay thinks that he needs to intervene 30 seconds into my speech, I will, but I was about to complete my point.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Always speak through the chair. Briefly, Russell Findlay.

Russell Findlay: That is the Willie Rennie and Daniel Johnson school of body language. Will Daniel Johnson give an example of what body language he thinks is indicative of his theory?

Daniel Johnson: Mr Findlay might need to watch the video. His hesitancy and awkwardness when he opened the debate spoke volumes. Let us be clear. A number of people have made the same point—

Craig Hoy: Lie down on the psychiatrist's couch, why don't you?

Daniel Johnson: I believe, Deputy Presiding Officer, that members are able to intervene if they want to, and that they do not need to speak from a sedentary position. Is that correct?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That is correct. Continue, Mr Johnson.

Daniel Johnson: Many people have made the same comment that it is not racist to want to talk about migration, and it is not. That point was made by members on the Conservative benches and it was made by Jamie Hepburn, who said that the problem is with the conflation of issues and the perpetuation of inaccurate myths. Many speakers have conflated migration with illegal migration, and illegal migration with small boat crossings. The reality is that illegal migration is a very small

proportion of total net migration, and small boat crossings are a vanishingly small proportion of that.

For the Conservative Party to continue to conflate the issues and to perpetuate such myths and tropes is to feed the real anxieties and fears that exist in our community. That is where there is a problem. If anything is racist, it is that conflation, because it is not right.

Ultimately, the debate has gone to a very worrying place by conflating the housing emergency in Scotland with illegal migration. That is not helpful. It is not helpful for discussions about migration and it is not helpful for discussions about the housing emergency.

Above all else, Mr Findlay said that he wants a straightforward and commonsense debate. If he wants that, why did the Conservatives introduce a debate on social justice? If they were so confident talking about migration, why did they not introduce a debate on migration itself? The email that came round from business managers said that this would be a debate on social justice. That speaks volumes.

Kevin Stewart: Mr Johnson is making good points. One thing that has hardly been touched on is that the Tories wish to leave the ECHR. That would leave us as the only country to do so apart from Belarus—there are folk from Belarus here today—and Russia. Does Mr Johnson think—as I do—that it would be wrong to leave the ECHR?

Daniel Johnson: I will reflect on that point. What happened to the party of Churchill, who made the speech in 1948 in which he called for a charter of human rights? What happened to the party that signed up to the ECHR? Indeed, what happened to the party of Harold Macmillan, who believed that we solve problems by building houses?

The most unfortunate thing about this whole debate is that there are things that we need to talk about in relation to migration and solving the housing emergency in Scotland. However, by conflating those issues, the Conservatives have let the SNP off the hook. We should have been talking about how we build more houses and solve the problems in our communities. By peddling tropes and mistruths, the Conservatives are merely fuelling prejudices.

Rhoda Grant was absolutely right: this debate has ultimately been about the Conservatives trying to position themselves to the right of Reform, and that is pretty deplorable.

15:49

The Minister for Equalities (Kaukab Stewart): As we have heard in the debate, language is

incredibly important. We need to ensure that we are talking about the same issues and that we are using the correct terminology. Not doing so perpetuates the misinformation that some seek to weaponise against individuals and communities.

Russell Findlay: Will the minister take an intervention?

Kaukab Stewart: I will press on. I will take the intervention later if I have time.

I would like to remind members of a few facts. People who are seeking asylum cannot access local authority housing. The asylum system and its operation are the responsibility of the UK Government. The UK has international legal obligations to recognise refugees who are in the UK, and the purpose of the UK asylum system is to determine whether someone who is in the UK needs protection in line with those obligations. It is only once the UK Government has made a determination to grant asylum that newly recognised refugees have the right to access housing, work and other publicly funded support. As the cabinet secretary made clear, using the term “illegal migrant” is not only divisive and dehumanising but inaccurate.

I will now turn to some of the contributions and reflect on as many of them as I can. First of all, I emphatically reject the use of the term “assimilation”. That has connotations of people having either to mask themselves or to mimic in order to fit in, instead of enabling cohesive multicultural communities. The days of ethnic minorities with strange names having to change their name in order to anglicise and disguise themselves, and of young Asian and black girls having to bleach their skin in order to fit in with white communities, should be condemned and put into the history books. I reject the term “assimilation”.

We also heard about the willingness to tear up the ECHR in order to demonise further an already vulnerable group. It seems that there are members among us who would willingly throw away the rights of every citizen and person in this country in order to demonise further people who are already vulnerable. The ECHR is a fundamental principle of this Scottish Parliament, and any MSP who is worth their salt will resist derogation from it in the strongest possible terms.

I will also look at the facts. In 2024, the UK had around 948,000 long-term immigrants, primarily through work and study visas. Of those, 108,138 claimed asylum, of which 35,000 arrived via small boats. That is just 3.7 per cent of the total number of long-term immigrants in 2024. It is important to remember those numbers.

We recognise that the current UK Government inherited a broken asylum system, a backlog in

decision making and large asylum accommodation estates. People are stuck in that system, which reduces their ability to integrate and to be able to work.

The bottleneck in decision making is the direct result of the UK Illegal Migration Act 2023, which is a totally unworkable and unconscionable piece of legislation. It was never supposed to work; it was an attempt to control the headlines in an election year. In the same way, these debates in the Scottish Parliament are not supposed to improve homelessness; rather, they are an attempt to lower the bar of what is considered acceptable rhetoric in the run-up to next year’s elections. The Scottish electorate can see right through that. People are organising in their communities to stand up to the demonisation of people seeking asylum, and I have every faith that they will overwhelmingly reject that premise at the ballot box.

I urge the chamber to reject this inaccurate and disgraceful motion. This Government will uphold Scotland’s values of compassion, dignity and respect, and it will protect all our communities.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Meghan Gallacher to wind up the debate.

15:54

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): Thank you, Presiding Officer—

Russell Findlay: Will Meghan Gallacher take an intervention?

Meghan Gallacher: I certainly will.

Russell Findlay: This is slightly unorthodox, but the refusal of these grandstanding SNP politicians to take interventions while hurling insults and inaccuracies, even by their standards, is truly pathetic. Does Meghan Gallacher agree that that is evidence of how out of touch they are with the concerns of people across Scotland?

Meghan Gallacher: I agree, and I certainly will be talking about why the Government should listen to people in communities up and down Scotland who believe that illegal immigration is a huge concern. That is why the Scottish Conservatives have brought two debates to the chamber on illegal immigration in recent weeks.

I understand that parties do not want to discuss the issue and want to swerve the difficult discussions, but I must say that the response from the cabinet secretary when Russell Findlay tried to intervene was nothing less than arrogant and dogmatic. That showed how we should not debate illegal immigration in the chamber. If we want to solve the problems, we need to be able to debate

them. We cannot ignore the argument or the distrust that we are seeing in our communities.

As Russell Findlay said, it is not racist to talk about immigration. Our constituents expect us to talk about issues, no matter how difficult the conversation is, and that is what we are trying to do. There is growing unrest in our country, and it is not simply about immigration; it is about neglect, which is a point on which I actually agree with Maggie Chapman.

The Government has spent years undermining its own public services, only to now ask struggling communities to take on even more pressure through immigration without consultation or transparency, and without putting in valid support networks.

Kaukab Stewart: *[Made a request to intervene.]*

Meghan Gallacher: Another point that I want to raise is that these are typically working-class areas. People in areas in my region of Central Scotland are struggling due to the cost of living, childcare costs and being unable to find good skilled jobs. However, most importantly, they feel left behind by local and national Government.

Perhaps Kaukab Stewart would like to pick up on areas where she thinks that her Government has left those communities behind?

Kaukab Stewart: No—

Meghan Gallacher: You pressed the intervention button.

Kaukab Stewart: Presiding Officer, can I clarify that Meghan Gallacher is taking my intervention from earlier?

My intervention was to ask whether you could give an indication of any constructive proposals that you have put forward to ensure that regular and safe routes are provided.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Speak through the chair.

Kaukab Stewart: Has Meghan Gallacher or her party engaged with the UK Government to release the resources that are required to support everybody?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can give you the time back for that, Ms Gallacher.

Meghan Gallacher: That is a reserved issue. We are talking about the strains on public services in relation to illegal immigration in this country.

If Kaukab Stewart wants to talk about reserved matters, particularly the ECHR, which I think is an important issue, let us talk about that. A detailed report on that was produced not by a politician but by Lord Wolfson, who is one of the leading King's counsel in the country. The report said that legal

immigration is too high and must come down and that illegal immigration is too high and must come down.

The report also talked about the problems with the ECHR. I am actually looking for a bit of consensus with the minister, because I hope that she would agree that, when there are situations such as that of a convicted paedophile in Glasgow who was prevented from being deported back to the Democratic Republic of Congo because of his right to family life, that shows that there are problems with the ECHR. I hope that the minister is able to agree with me on that point.

I will go back to my point about public services. The Government has let NHS waiting times spiral out of control, has failed to address chronic teacher shortages in crumbling schools and has allowed councils to carry the burden of rising costs with shrinking budgets. That is the neglect that we are talking about. I therefore cannot understand why the Greens continually support the SNP Government when it comes to budgets and coalition Governments. The Government has failed. It has had 18 years to address public service issues in this country and has failed.

I will finish on a point that I have been raising continually over the past few weeks. We have heard the term “community cohesion” a few times. I believe that the Government is serious about community cohesion and wants to try to stop the protests and look at ways in which we can have a more blended community, which is something that I hope everyone would be able to agree with. However, the Government has not been able to maintain the cohesion of public services, which is where the fundamental problems come in.

What do people see in Falkirk, which is in my region? They see hotels filled with asylum seekers at short notice, without a consultation process.

I return to the issue of the demographics of the people who have been arriving, which I have raised before. Across the UK, 62 per cent of asylum seeker claims are from adult males, compared with 21 per cent from adult females. For small boat arrivals, the imbalance is even greater: 75 per cent are adult men and 10 per cent are children. Compare that with the Ukrainian adults who arrived in the UK under the sponsorship and family schemes, most of whom—70 per cent—were women. Ukrainian men aged 18 to 60 were not allowed to leave Ukraine. Of all arrivals under those schemes, 27 per cent were under the age of 18.

We need to look at that, because that is what people see, and it is where the anger and distrust are coming from. People are seeing their own needs—their own families, schools and hospitals—pushed further down the priority list.

The SNP Government has had 18 years to fix our public services, and it has failed. That is why we are seeing discontent and distrust in our country.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate on stopping illegal immigration and recognising its impact on housing.

There will be a brief pause before we move to the next item of business, to allow for a changeover of members on the front benches.

Colleges and Apprenticeships

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-19253, in the name of Murdo Fraser, on backing Scotland's colleges and apprenticeships. I invite members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons. I call Murdo Fraser to speak to and move the motion.

16:02

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Conservatives in Scotland believe that economic growth has to be the first priority of Government. That need has never been more urgent than now.

The quarterly economic indicator survey published today by Scottish Chambers and the Fraser of Allander Institute contains some stark messages. In four out of five main business sectors, there has been a sharp decline in confidence, with manufacturing and construction—two of the most important sectors to the Scottish economy—being the hardest hit, and 72 per cent of Scottish businesses are now concerned about their tax burden. Against that backdrop, seeing this Government place a greater focus on economic growth is essential.

Is it not interesting that, today, the Scottish National Party wants to talk about independence—the only thing that it cares about? However, Scottish Conservatives are on the side of the people, and talking about their priority, which is growing the economy and dealing with household bills.

When it comes to taking spending decisions on the extensive resources that are under the control of the Scottish Government, there needs to be a focus on expenditure that will actively contribute towards growing our economy. Against that backdrop, the report on Scotland's colleges, which Audit Scotland published on Friday, contained some stark and concerning messages. It follows on from equally stark messages in the Scottish Funding Council report issued just a few days beforehand, which warned that some colleges face insolvency in the current financial year—they face actual insolvency, under this SNP Government.

According to Audit Scotland, college funding has suffered from a 20 per cent real-terms cut in spending over the past five years. We see the consequences of that on every campus in Scotland. The Audit Scotland report states that the college sector workforce contracted by some 8 per cent in the year 2023-24 alone.

In the region that I represent, all the colleges are impacted. Fife College is expressing concern about the availability of future courses. UHI Perth had to save some £4 million by the middle of the year. It has already had to close the campus nursery, while also contemplating staff redundancies and cutting what it calls “unviable courses”. It has even discussed cutting degree courses entirely.

Lastly, Forth Valley College is proposing to close its popular and busy Alloa campus, meaning that any Clackmannanshire students would have to travel to Stirling for further education, leaving a substantial black hole in the centre of the town and the centre of the county. That is bad news for staff, bad news for students and bad news for the local economy.

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Colleges are fantastic institutions, as you have said. They are the skills engine for the Scottish economy. You have rightly identified the issues that are happening in Forth Valley College and Alloa. It is up to the Scottish Government to do more to retain students, maintain skills and secure facilities. That is what we fundamentally believe.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Always speak through the chair.

Murdo Fraser: Alexander Stewart is absolutely right to point the finger at the Scottish Government.

The Scottish Government cannot blame the situation on Westminster or an overall lack of resource. Over the past five years, during which college payments have reduced by 20 per cent in real terms, the overall Scottish Government budget has had a real-terms increase of 2.5 per cent. The closures and cutbacks are entirely down to the choices that the SNP has made to deprioritise skills training for the future workforce that our colleges provide.

Some, but not all, apprenticeships are delivered through our colleges; yet, already, there are concerns about the shortage of apprenticeship places. In 2024-25, learning providers requested around 34,000 apprenticeships to meet the needs of the economy, but the Scottish Government funded just over 25,000, which left a substantial gap. The trade body Engineering Scotland has estimated that 20 per cent of the skills demand from employers has been unmet due to those real-terms cuts in apprenticeship spending, and, elsewhere, businesses have expressed concern about the growing skills gap. The Open University report “Business Barometer 2025” states that 56 per cent of Scottish businesses are experiencing skills shortages, while 39 per cent expect the skills gap to worsen in the next five years.

To give an example from another sector, the number of extra construction workers that are needed in Scotland for the period from 2025 to 2029 is estimated at 3,590 per year, yet we simply do not have the apprenticeship places available to provide the training to meet that demand. In the words of Michelle Ferguson, director of the Confederation of British Industry Scotland,

“Scottish Apprenticeships will be critical in building the future workforce”,

but we are simply not providing enough of them.

There has been some encouraging language from the Scottish Government about the need to promote parity of esteem between different learning routes. Apprenticeships are of value to our future economy, as are university degrees, but apprenticeships get much less attention and much lower funding—as do college places; figures from the Funding Council show that, for the 2024-25 financial year, funding per college student is just £5,054, while the equivalent per university student is £7,558, which is nearly half as much again.

Lorna Slater (Lothian) (Green): Will the member take an intervention?

Murdo Fraser: Yes, if I have time.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There is really not very much time in hand. It is up to the member.

Murdo Fraser: I will take a brief intervention.

Lorna Slater: It is on a point of agreement, I think. The member will recall that the Economy and Fair Work Committee heard evidence that apprenticeship and other college students have a much higher rate than university students of working in the field for which they have studied. There is something to be said for the success of apprenticeships and college places in producing people who are able to work in the field for which they study.

Murdo Fraser: I absolutely agree with Lorna Slater’s point about the importance of apprenticeships in delivering skills for the future.

The SNP’s response is to mess around with quangos, transferring responsibility for apprenticeships and national programmes from Skills Development Scotland to the Scottish Funding Council. It is hard to find any stakeholder who believes that that is the right move at the present time, and the transfer is likely to consume precious resources that could be spent elsewhere.

We need a restoration of funding to our colleges and apprenticeships, because they are vital to the economy of the future. They deserve investment, not cuts. That is what my motion calls for.

I move,

That the Parliament recognises that future economic growth is reliant on providing the right opportunities to create good jobs that allow businesses to expand; notes with concern the findings of the recent Audit Scotland report, highlighting a 20% real-terms cut in funding to the college sector over the past five years, and believes that this has a negative impact on the economy and limits opportunities for young people to get ahead; acknowledges the concern from business representative groups about the future of apprenticeships, and the harm that a restriction in apprenticeship numbers causes to job creation in Scotland, and calls on the Scottish Government to restore funding to Scotland's colleges and raise the number of modern apprenticeship places from 25,507 in 2024-25 to at least the 34,000 identified by Skills Development Scotland as necessary to meet Scottish economic growth ambitions.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Richard Lochhead to speak to and move S6M-19253.3. Minister, you have up to five minutes.

I apologise—I meant to call Ben Macpherson. You still have up to five minutes, minister.

16:10

The Minister for Higher and Further Education (Ben Macpherson): My colleagues and I welcome today's debate, which is on matters that are important to all of us as we represent our constituents. We also welcome the opportunity to respond to the motion and restate the Scottish Government's strong commitment to supporting our people to fulfil their potential and to tackling the skills shortages in our economy.

We are focused on building a fair, prosperous and successful economy, which is supported by an education and skills system that is flexible and ready to meet the needs of people, communities and employers. We know that Scotland's future success depends on creating good jobs and making sure that people have the right opportunities and skills to access them.

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): As Murdo Fraser said, it is encouraging to hear that from the minister. However, how does he square those words with the 20 per cent real-terms cut in the budget for colleges?

Ben Macpherson: I will come on to the specifics in due course, but, in response to Ms Smith, and in general terms, I emphasise that our colleges, employers, universities and trading providers are key to helping people to gain the skills that they need. Collectively, we members of the Scottish Government greatly value their contribution, especially in delivering a record number of apprenticeships and in helping so many school leavers to move on to positive destinations.

Our amendment sets out our record on young people and others achieving positive destinations, as well as the significant investment that has been made this financial year. It also states that we note the terms of the Audit Scotland report. We know

that there is more work to do. We are committed to a new national approach to skills planning, which will be led by the Scottish Government. Its aim will be to better align post-school education and training pathways with Scotland's long-term skills needs, especially in key sectors of our economy that support the move to net zero.

We are working closely with the Scottish Funding Council and Skills Development Scotland to take that forward. Together, we have agreed a model for skills planning that we will shape through engagement with colleges, universities, employers and regional partners. That collaborative approach means that we can move quickly and make real progress. We are also working with regional economic partnerships, which are really important, to build on what is already working well and to strengthen regional skills planning.

Our goal is to empower regions to deliver on their economic and social ambitions while contributing to national priorities. We want the post-school system to be more responsive to regional needs, and we are building on the strong foundations that have been set through the Scottish Funding Council's regional tertiary pathfinders programme, along with other local initiatives.

However, there are limits to what we can do on our own. We do not operate in a bubble. The impact of Brexit and the United Kingdom Government's migration system has undoubtedly added to labour market pressures—that is a fact—and we continue to make the case for a more flexible and responsive approach to migration that reflects Scotland's specific needs.

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): Does the minister accept any responsibility at all for the state of Scotland's colleges?

Ben Macpherson: The Scottish Government is proud to work alongside Scotland's colleges on how they are delivering as anchor institutions in our communities. Yesterday, I visited Glasgow Kelvin College in Pam Duncan-Glancy's region, and I was hugely impressed by everyone with whom I engaged there. In my role I am committed to having positive, constructive and proactive engagement with our college sector, and I am proud to have done that in the days in which I have been in post so far.

Although, as I have mentioned, tackling certain pressures is out of our hands, we are not standing still. We are taking responsibility and making progress. We know that transformation takes time, and we accept that action is needed now to address the skills gaps that constrain parts of our economy from fulfilling their full potential. That is why, alongside our long-term reform, we are

continuing to invest in sectors that are important to Scotland's economic future, including offshore wind, social care, engineering and advanced manufacturing.

Building on that commitment, we have agreed with the Energy Skills Partnership a new grant to deliver a college-led offshore wind skills programme, backed by up to £3 million in 2025-26. There is more that I could say on that, but my ministerial colleague might touch on it in his closing speech on behalf of the Government.

As I close my own speech on behalf of the Government in this important debate, I say that, by working together as a Parliament, we can create more opportunities for our people, strengthen our regions and power Scotland's future economy. We welcome this opportunity to discuss those really important matters in the chamber.

I move amendment S6M-19253.3, to leave out from "with concern" to end and insert:

"the Audit Scotland report entitled, Scotland's colleges 2025, and the importance of continued investment in Scotland's colleges and skills system to support inclusive economic success, prosperity and job creation, including provision of around three quarters of a billion pounds in Scotland's colleges in 2025-26, and an additional £3.5 million for skills, through the Scottish Budget; acknowledges that this is particularly important in the thriving sectors, like those critical to realising the transition to net zero, and the shared opportunities of this; recognises the key role that colleges, employers and training providers have played in ensuring that 93% of school leavers have a positive destination, and providing apprenticeships and training to a record 39,000 individuals, and notes, however, concern about the impact of Brexit and the UK Government's migration system, which is contributing to key skills gaps and labour market shortages."

16:15

Lorna Slater (Lothian) (Green): We can all agree on the vital importance of skills and training. We know that the ability to obtain them substantially determines a person's opportunities in life and, collectively, the success and dynamism of our economy. What we are debating is how best to use public funds and resources to support skills and training. There is no doubt that, in times of constrained public spending, more money cannot be the only answer. We need to properly explore the art of the possible and how to make the most impact with the resources that are available.

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): Is Lorna Slater ashamed that the Government that she was a member of received £875 million, raised from Scottish employers through HM Revenue and Customs for the apprenticeship levy—while, during that same period, only £700 million was actually spent on apprenticeships in Scotland? Where did that money go?

Lorna Slater: I share Craig Hoy's frustration with the lack of transparency around how apprenticeship levy funds are handled. However, he should note that those funds are not kept ring fenced in any way and end up as part of the block grant to the Scottish Government, so they must be accounted for in the budget. Of course we all understand the budget constraints that the Scottish Government is under, but I understand the member's frustration.

I have been encouraged by the current impetus for increasing and improving workplace learning. I certainly felt that I learned more in the years that I spent working for engineering firms, as part of my university's co-op programme, than I ever did in any classroom.

In addition to providing valuable experience, workplace learning is an opportunity for employers, businesses and organisations to contribute to skills development in Scotland for the benefit of their own businesses. All the heavy lifting cannot and should not be done through the public purse. There should be an expectation on employers and investors to take some responsibility for the training and development of their staff. After all, they are the ones who are generating profit from their staff. Investing in their people is for their own benefit.

In my region and in portfolio work, I hear many good things from employers about the value of taking on apprentices, and I hear many good things from apprentices, but I also hear frustrations. Employers are frustrated that colleges are inflexible in their offerings, which means that apprentices have to wait months for the school year to start in order to get the course that they need.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): Will the member give way?

Lorna Slater: I am sorry, but I need to make some headway.

The courses are offered on limited and inflexible days, so apprentices' work weeks are inefficient, and their travel and childcare expenses are increased as a result. Employers that can afford to do so have therefore started using private training providers to overcome those problems and to develop bespoke courses. Private training providers can afford the latest equipment and will teach specific skills, such as how to install a heat pump, for example, rather than the college doing so. The college will include heat pumps as part of a broader plumbing course that does not necessarily meet the needs of that apprentice. In some cases private training provision is questionable, while in other cases it works well.

I spoke to one apprentice who was apprenticed to a local authority. The local authority had

designated itself as both employer and training provider. The apprentice had no formal training standards or provision, and she had no one to turn to in order to complain about that state of affairs. She had no independent evaluation of her learning or of the quality of training that she was receiving. If she complained to the local authority about the poor training provision, she risked failing her apprenticeship—and we are failing apprentices like her.

I have already spoken in the chamber about the gender disparities among apprenticeships and, I suspect, in college course provision, too. Men get apprenticeships that put them into well-paid sectors. Women are channelled into low-paid sectors, which may trap them for a lifetime of inequality. We cannot support that on the public dime.

Mechanisms must be put in place to ensure that women have an equal opportunity to gain skills and employment in well-paid sectors. It begs the question of why we use public money to support certain apprenticeship and college courses at all, if the result is—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Ms Slater, you need to conclude.

Lorna Slater: —that people graduating from those courses do not achieve well-paid work.

I move amendment S6M-19253.2, to leave out from “that future” to end and insert:

“the transformative power of education and training, and the vital roles that colleges and apprenticeships play in supporting young people and building resilient communities, including in a just transition away from fossil fuels; acknowledges the importance of having college facilities located close to where people live, ensuring accessibility and inclusion; believes that improved college governance is essential to prevent poor management decisions and to safeguard the quality of provision; acknowledges the work of EIS-FELA and UNISON in campaigning for better further education provision and supporting college staff across the country who face uncertainty about the future; calls for enhanced outcomes for women, students and apprentices, to ensure that they are not disproportionately channelled into low-waged sectors; urges colleges to align their skills offerings with the ambitions of the National Performance Framework; supports the introduction of regulated minimum training hours and standards for apprenticeships; believes that colleges must be living wage employers and exemplars of fair work practices, and calls for all apprentices to be paid a living wage.”

16:20

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): It gives me great pleasure to follow Lorna Slater, who gave several very useful insights. This is a useful debate and—dare I say it—it stands in contrast to the previous motion that the Conservatives moved. It is not only that this debate is important but that the motion is based on

the facts. The issue is too important for us to ignore the facts, which is why we did not lodge an amendment.

It is important that we let the facts speak for themselves, because a 20 per cent real-terms cut in funding is of concern, and it speaks to the direction of travel of the skills system, which is vital for us to achieve economic growth. That case was made strongly and in a matter-of-fact way by Murdo Fraser—in contrast to the presentation by the person who beat him to the Scottish Conservative leadership. One wonders what might have happened if history had been different.

That position also stands in contrast to the Government’s presentation. We cannot support the Government’s amendment because—I say this with some trepidation—it is misleading. First, the use of the figure of 39,000 individuals in training might make members think that there has been an increase in the number of people in apprenticeships, but we know that the numbers of starts and completions have never recovered to their pre-pandemic levels. The figure is also misleading in another way, because it is not the most up-to-date number. There has been a subsequent iteration of the statistics, and the current number is actually 37,215.

I say gently to Mr Macpherson—because I deeply respect him—that this is not a good start to his time in his role. I know that he is a serious-minded person. I believe him when he states what he wants to do in that job and the importance of skills. However, it is not treating Audit Scotland’s work with seriousness if its key findings are expunged, which is what the Government’s amendment would do, and nor is the subject treated seriously by using essentially misleading figures.

Let us be clear that the situation is serious and has been led to in part by the Government’s mismanaged and poorly handled college reform agenda. It is no good for the Government to say, “We work in partnership with colleges.” The Government brought colleges under its direct control, hobbled their financial flexibility and made it essentially impossible for them to deliver part-time courses. For the Government to stand to one side and wring its hands about the state of the college sector, when it brought the colleges under its direct control, is not credible.

We know that 30,000 fewer Scots are getting places in colleges and that some of the more flexible funding that was available through the flexible workforce development fund has been withdrawn. That is all fundamentally linked to a college funding regime that everyone knows—we can talk to anyone in the sector about it—is well past the point at which it needs reform. I know that this is getting a bit technical but, if we look at it in

any detail, it is clear that the college credit system is no longer fit for purpose. If we were going to have a serious debate, we would be looking at those deficiencies.

Brian Whittle: Will the member give way?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The member has only 30 seconds left to speak.

Daniel Johnson: I reiterate Murdo Fraser's point that we need to look at reform. Much as Lorna Slater said, we need to look at how we flex our training and apprenticeship system. The problem with the Tertiary Education and Training (Funding and Governance) (Scotland) Bill is that it is a reshuffling of quangos without any clarity about direction, strategy or intended outcomes for the skills system. For those reasons, we will be supporting the amended Conservative motion. It is also why we oppose the bill in its current form.

16:24

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): I feel so much better in this second Conservative debate, because the acceptable faces of the Conservative Party are back on the front bench again, giggling away and enjoying themselves—that is what we prefer to see, rather than those in the previous debate.

I have two bits of positive news. First, there is high demand for apprenticeships. We should celebrate that fact; it is a positive thing. Businesses want to take on people of all ages in apprenticeship programmes—that is a great thing. The demand is way in excess of what we are supplying, but it is a positive thing. There is hunger for a growing workforce among those companies, which is a good thing.

Secondly, in the most recent budget negotiations, the Liberal Democrats pursued £3.5 million for skills support in offshore wind and social care, which is progressing. We should celebrate both those things, but that is where the good news ends.

Brian Whittle: Will the member take an intervention?

Willie Rennie: Not just now.

Throughout the debate, we have heard repeatedly about the Audit Scotland report, which is one of many reports that should cause the minister, who has newly taken up his post, to shiver. The college sector has experienced a 20 per cent cut in real terms in the past five years alone.

In addition, in its delayed report on financial sustainability, the Scottish Funding Council has identified that most colleges are not financially sustainable and that some are on the verge of

insolvency. That should be enough to keep the minister awake at night. Student numbers have been cut by 12 per cent and staff numbers by 8 per cent, so the capacity of colleges has been reduced, too. The SFC predicts that more is yet to come, unless steps are taken.

That comes on top of the Government's record over the past 15 years, roughly since the regionalisation programme, during which colleges have experienced successive cuts at every opportunity. I do not think that that has happened because Government ministers have wanted to cut college funding but, when ministers are faced with a number of choices, the college sector simply does not compete. As far as the Government is concerned, the sector does not have the requisite political weight or attractiveness. That is why colleges are always at the end of the queue when there is money to go round.

Murdo Fraser: Does Mr Rennie share my concern—I am sure that he does—about what is happening at Scotland's Rural College's Elmwood campus in Cupar, where, thanks to cutbacks, courses are being downgraded and removed, which potentially threatens the entire viability of a campus that is of great importance to people locally?

Willie Rennie: Absolutely. The SRUC is one of those hybrid institutions that provide both higher education and further education. Its main building has been closed, the farm has been sold off, the student accommodation has been closed and the golf course has, in effect, gone. All of that has happened on the SNP Government's watch.

The SRUC is not alone. There are concerns about cuts at Fife College and Forth Valley College in Alloa. Last week, I attended a meeting with the EIS Further Education Lecturers Association, which is very concerned about the changes at the University of the Highlands and Islands. Dundee and Angus College is having to make £2.5 million of savings this year.

Courses have been cut, student numbers are down and buildings have been closed. That is happening across the country. Therefore, there are a number of things that the minister can no longer claim. First, he cannot claim that he is creating opportunity for people from disadvantaged backgrounds. Colleges are often the route out of poverty, the route into a good job and the route to a good life. As a result of the cuts to colleges, those opportunities are being reduced.

Colleges are particularly important when it comes to the route through FE into HE. That uniquely Scottish route is a great advantage, but the Government can no longer claim credit for it. Parity of esteem can no longer be regarded as a

priority for the Government. The Government is not even meeting the demands in relation to the apprenticeship scheme. That is why it needs to realise that it is not fulfilling its rhetoric. All that it has given us is words, and the reality is that we are facing cuts.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to the open debate.

16:28

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): Not a week goes by without me having a meeting with an organisation or speaking to a business in my Lothian region in which the issue of the skills shortages in our economy is raised. I am sure that the same will be true for every MSP. How we redirect the focus of our education system to deliver on the challenge that we face in our college sector will require not only a national effort but difficult decisions to realign future demand in key industries and sectors and meet the demographic changes that our country faces.

As many briefings for the debate state, there is significant unmet demand for places, apprenticeships and courses. That should focus all our minds on how we build a system that can deliver for people. In June, the principals of Ayrshire College and Glasgow Kelvin College gave evidence to the Education, Children and Young People Committee. Angela Cox from Ayrshire College noted that the college was unable to award a place to 764 students who had passed interviews, and Joanna Campbell from Glasgow Kelvin College noted that the college is accepting only one out of every three applicants. We know that the current system is not delivering to meet demand. The Scottish Government funded 25,507 modern apprenticeship places in 2024-25, but demand exceeded those funded places for learning.

I think that there is a cross-party consensus that we need a new approach, but the Scottish Government's Tertiary Education and Training (Funding and Governance) (Scotland) Bill will not deliver the better system or the vision for apprenticeships that we all want. As Murdo Fraser stated, the SNP's response to this mess is simply to mess around with quangos and transfer responsibility for the national apprenticeship programme from Skills Development Scotland to the Scottish Funding Council. I do not believe that that is the right move at present. I agree with the concerns that are being expressed by CBI Scotland and Scottish Chambers of Commerce, namely that the bill presents the potential to dismantle what already works and leaves employers in the dark in relation to the future of apprenticeship schemes and our wider workforce system.

As others have touched on, it is important that there is transparency on the spending of the apprenticeship levy here in Scotland. In recent weeks, the Scottish Government has been accused of raiding £171 million from that scheme, and SNP ministers have spent only £704 million of the £875 million that has been raised. Businesses are rightly asking where the rest of the money from the levy has gone and why we have not seen vital training opportunities delivered in Scotland. Michelle Ferguson, the director of CBI Scotland, has stated:

"Businesses are paying in, but they are not seeing the return."

She added that

"We need full transparency on how levy reserves raised in Scotland"

are spent in Scotland.

The SNP's record on colleges is shameful. We need to admit that today, and I hope that the Government understands that. There has been a 20 per cent cut in real-terms funding, and the loss of more than 100,000 places. Waiting lists are at record levels, and the credits system is in crisis. When councils try to deliver flexibility, they are not being given the opportunity to take on more students. The new net zero opportunities at North East Scotland College, which we have been told about at committee, will not see any more credit.

The Government needs to look at how we can achieve more and how our college sector can deliver. Above all, we need a skills revolution in Scotland. That is why Scottish Conservatives are leading the debate for change. We want a significant increase of 10,000 in the number of modern apprenticeship places to boost economic growth, create jobs and allow businesses to expand. Working with our college sector and businesses, we can meet our young people's aspirations and deliver to tackle the shortages that our workforce and our economy face. I support Murdo Fraser's motion.

16:32

Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP): No one in the chamber doubts that Scotland's economic success depends on people, on skills and on the talent and ambition of our workforce. To build a fair and resilient economy, we need more than slogans about growth; we need investment in people, in fair work and in the systems that help people to thrive. That is what the Scottish Government has been doing, despite a decade of Westminster austerity that has cut Scotland's capital and resource budgets in real terms year after year.

Let us look at some of the fundamentals. Ninety-three per cent of school leavers have a positive destination, and the Scottish Government has provided apprenticeships and training to a record 39,000 individuals. No one, including Tory MSPs, can explain away the impact of Brexit and no one, including Labour MSPs, can argue that the UK Government's migration system is contributing to filling key skills gaps and labour market shortages. Both parties lie down to the Farage narrative.

The Conservative motion talks about restoring college funding and expanding apprenticeships. Those are worthy aims, but it is worth reminding members that the Conservatives' economic decisions stripped more than £1.6 billion from Scotland's spending power since 2021-22.

Even in those circumstances, however, Scotland's approach to skills is working. The national strategy for economic transformation, the fair work action plan and the skills delivery landscape review are aligning education, business and Government to deliver the workforce that Scotland needs. The minister talked about the energy skills partnership and the work that it is doing, which is relevant to my constituency of East Lothian. The Scottish Government has protected more than 25,000 apprenticeship places, prioritising sectors that are driving future growth, such as renewables—

Craig Hoy: Will the member give way on that point?

Paul McLennan: I have only four minutes, Mr Hoy.

Those sectors include renewables, digital, health and social care, construction and engineering. Apprenticeships in Scotland are not just about filling vacancies; they are about building a fair, productive and inclusive economy. Our colleges have been at the forefront of that, supporting young people, career changers and those who are furthest from the labour market to access opportunities that change lives.

I have seen at first hand how colleges support my constituency by working with local employers. My local college, Edinburgh College, has stated that the south-east of Scotland region

"is the fastest growing in Scotland"

and that

"84% of Scotland's population growth in the next ten years will be in Edinburgh and Southeast Scotland",

with East Lothian's population forecast to grow by a third.

Edinburgh College has also stated that it supports the reforms that are proposed in the Tertiary Education and Training (Funding and Governance) (Scotland) Bill. It said:

"It is imperative that apprenticeship provision is expanded if we are to take advantage of the substantial economic opportunities that come from our region's demographic growth."

Last year, the college carried out its own skills survey research with regional employers. It stated that

"88% of employers say that some"

of their

"vacancies are hard to fill due to difficulties finding applicants with the required skills, knowledge and/or experience".

It is important that we look at the reforms that the Government is proposing in that regard.

A strong college sector is a key driver to economic success in East Lothian and across Scotland in order to take those opportunities forward. We can contrast that with the Conservatives' record: scrapping free tuition, cutting investment in lifelong learning and tying the hands of devolved Governments through austerity budgets. It is not a credible lecture on opportunity—it is an exercise in economic hypocrisy.

Let us be clear that Scotland's skills system is being held back not by a lack of ambition or ability, but by a lack of powers. We do not control migration to fill skills gaps, we cannot borrow to invest strategically in college estates, and we do not get a fair return from the energy resources off our shores. That is why independence matters. It is not a distraction from economic priorities; it is the essential step to deliver them. With full powers, Scotland could invest directly in the skills that underpin a fair work nation, where every worker earns a decent wage, has security and shares in the prosperity that they help to create.

The SNP will always back investment in skills, apprenticeships and fair work, but the real choice that is before us is simple: do we want to manage decline under Westminster austerity or to build opportunity with the powers of independence? I know which side I am on.

16:36

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): As many members will know, I served a happy period as my party's shadow skills minister, and it gave me plenty of opportunities to regularly meet representatives from the sector, undertake visits around the country and see at first hand some of the incredible things that can be done with skills and training. It underlined to me that, as we have heard from colleagues today, a skilled workforce is the central driver of a successful economy, but it also highlighted the many shortcomings in our current system. That

system is clearly struggling rather than thriving, and it is expected to do more with less, time and time again.

The sector is no stranger to being deprioritised and defunded but, perhaps more than any other public service, it has been forced to sit through endless strategies and action plans that talk big but achieve so little. That has all happened while every stakeholder and most of the budgets have been sliced to the bone and rhetoric from ministers rarely, if ever, matches delivery.

It was once a popular cry from members on the SNP benches that this Parliament lacked economic levers. Education and skills are, without a doubt, some of the greatest economic levers that we can pull, but the Government's record tells us what it thinks about that proposition. That record has left the majority of employers highlighting key skills shortages and struggles to recruit, and the college sector has been asked to find even greater savings, with the inevitable results of shrinking provision and holes in budgets.

Increasingly, there is a lack of real choice for Scotland's young people and all those who want to train and learn beyond school. Last week's Audit Scotland report "Scotland's colleges 2025" is damning. It tells a tale not only of funding cuts by the Government, but of colleges being forced to make savings by decimating their workforce, risks that courses simply will not run, and a bleak financial outlook for the future. We should not and must not hold back from saying clearly that that means a future with fewer opportunities across the board.

Audit Scotland notes that one concern that is voiced by colleges is "competition from universities". I have spoken in the chamber before about the risk of treating university as a default destination. Even today, there is often a clear divide in many people's minds between the academic route, on the one hand, and the vocational route, on the other, and judgments are made on their respective value. For many school leavers, the full spectrum of options that are available, including perhaps less conventional routes, often remains unknown.

We foist a great deal of expectation on our young people in their teenage years, telling them to choose subjects, choose a degree and choose a career, and although some may have a great deal of certainty at that stage of their life, most do not. That is why I advocate for an improved approach to careers guidance in our schools. Matching people with the apprenticeships, training courses and qualifications that they need to succeed is not an optional extra; it must be the bedrock of our economic strategy.

Equally, we should not see skills only through the lens of young people. I am sure that many members have friends or colleagues who are in completely different jobs and careers from when they set out. However, a stubborn gap remains in provision for retraining. It is by no means original to say that the promise of lifelong learning that we have often heard about in the chamber has consistently been more of a soundbite than reality. An attempt to make it a genuine aspect of Scotland's skills landscape will become increasingly essential if people are to be able to navigate an economy that is changing faster than ever before, when existing skills can become redundant quickly, and when people may need more support to progress or policies that recognise the need to learn while earning in a more flexible way.

I am not optimistic about the Government's direction for skills training and colleges. Although I welcome that the Government, having thrown off the shackles of the Green's anti-business ideologies, seems at least to acknowledge that the economy exists, it is failing to engage with economic growth and the challenges of productivity in any meaningful way. In the coming years, we will face an economic transformation whether the Scottish Government sees it coming or not. There is a great deal to do but, first, that requires a Government that will give the skills and college sector the support that it deserves.

16:41

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): I can think of few policy areas that better sum up the knackered SNP Government than the state of Scotland's colleges. For years, colleges have asked the Government to give them a clear purpose as part of a wider economy and skills system. Audit Scotland's 2022 report was damning of the Government's lack of leadership of the skills system in general. That is part of the reason behind the Tertiary Education and Training (Funding and Governance) (Scotland) Bill. The Cumberford-Little report has sat on the shelf, gathering dust, for half a decade. For years, colleges have warned about the impact of budget cuts, which the SNP has delivered time and time again.

In 2022, Audit Scotland warned that change was needed to ensure that the college sector would be financially sustainable in the long term. It gave the same warning in 2023 and again in 2024. Just last week, the auditor general continued to bang his head against the SNP's brick wall and gave a damning verdict for 2025. Setting aside the spin and the bluster, he has confirmed that, since 2021-22, there has been a staggering 20 per cent real-terms cut in funding for college budgets. I am

afraid that that is a lamentable start to the Minister for Higher and Further Education's tenure in office.

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention?

Michael Marra: No, thank you, sir.

It is regrettable that he has deleted the entirety of Audit Scotland's analysis from the motion that we are debating.

Ben Macpherson *rose*—

Michael Marra: I am glad that the minister is on his feet. Does he accept Audit Scotland's verdict?

Ben Macpherson: I respect Mr Marra, as well as Mr Fraser. If the members read the Scottish Government's amendment, they will see that it notes the Audit Scotland report.

Michael Marra: It is one thing to note that it exists, but it is another thing to ignore entirely the analysis that it sets out, as the minister did in his opening speech. The rest of the amendment attributes the college sector's problems to Brexit and to some supposed form of continued austerity. People are asking what on earth has happened to the additional £5.2 billion in spending that was allocated to the Government in the UK's recently passed budget. What on earth has happened to the money?

Ben Macpherson: *rose*—

Michael Marra: No, thank you. The minister has had his chance.

At the same time as his Government is launching a cross-sectoral conversation about the sustainability of the university funding model, we are hearing that there might be a similar conversation for colleges. Perversely, that is happening while the Government is pushing a bill through the Parliament that deals with the tertiary education sector and fails to reference any of that work or how those things might interact. The idea that you can deal with one part of the tertiary sector without thinking about the others is, frankly, ridiculous. It guarantees that there will be further damage.

The dual crises in our colleges and universities are inextricably linked. The minister must understand that, when more universities go into clearing, colleges miss out on hundreds of students and hundreds of thousands of pounds. The principal of Dundee and Angus College has told that exact story in the press this week. It is an award-winning college—one of the best in the country—but it has suffered year-on-year cuts. One in eight members of staff have lost their jobs, and it is looking at a further £2.3 million of cuts this year. The minister has to recognise that his Government took all those colleges into its direct

control and that, therefore, he has to be able to tell us where he thinks that Dundee and Angus College should make the cuts.

This is a systemic mess. It is the result of grotesque incompetence and, worst of all, it was entirely foreseen. When I stood in the chamber and warned about the unsustainability of the university funding model, I was shouted down by the First Minister, and the Scottish National Party press office put out memes with my face on them. That was the Government's response: to try to shut down debate. This is a deeply unserious Government that is refusing to confront the issues that are staring it in the face—as it is doing today in the chamber.

The minister has to realise that his tenure comes at the end of 20 years of the SNP's wilful neglect of Scotland's colleges. We are at the fag-end of a knackered Government. Our colleges have fewer staff, fewer students and fewer courses, our students have fewer opportunities, our economy is weakened and our communities are diminished.

16:45

Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): Since 2020, Scotland's construction workforce has increased from 226,000 to 240,000, but a high turnover and retirements are straining capacity. In June this year, the Construction Industry Training Board highlighted that the industry must recruit 48,000 people by 2034 to meet demand. However, there are only 39,000 modern apprenticeships across Scotland, with 25 per cent of them being in construction-related occupations. Yes, we need more construction apprenticeships, especially now that Brexit has discouraged European workers from coming to not only Scotland but the whole of the UK. However, we should remember that an apprenticeship is a work-based learning programme, meaning that the individual must be employed by a company to begin training and will benefit from earning a wage while they work and study at college.

In my constituency of Edinburgh Pentlands, I have met young people who are eager to learn a trade and contribute to their communities but are too often met by closed doors because our small and medium-sized enterprises, which make up 98 per cent of Scotland's construction sector, often lack the resources to take on apprentices, especially at a time when they are struggling in the face of an increased construction material inflation rate of 37 per cent since 2020 and as educational institutions incur costs of £50 million as a result of the recent national insurance hike, which is Labour's tax on job creation.

Of course, the apprenticeship employer grant can provide up to £7,500 per apprentice. In addition, since 2006, apprenticeship completion rates have improved from around 50 per cent to nearly 80 per cent, which is significantly higher than in England, with sustained employment of 89 per cent among apprentices who complete their apprenticeship.

Although we still see firms that are hesitant to make that commitment to invest in apprenticeships, there are encouraging signs that some companies are trying to fill their skills gaps by employing more apprentices. For example, Kier Construction, which won the contract to build, in my constituency, Scotland's first Passivhaus-standard secondary school incorporating a swimming pool—Currie community high—created a total of 42 apprenticeships during the building project. In addition, it dedicated more than 400 hours to delivering educational outreach to secondary pupils from local schools, in the hope that they will consider a job in construction when they go into the world of work.

Last academic year, Wester Hailes high school piloted a new construction pathway, with support from the Scottish Traditional Building Forum and the City of Edinburgh Council. The national 5 creative industries course in roof slating was so successful that it is being repeated this year, along with a nat 5 creative industries course in stone carving. By giving those courses parity of esteem with academic subjects, we are encouraging young people to consider a career in construction.

Edinburgh College's Granton construction campus has state-of-the-art workshops in CITB-approved training areas. It emphasises hands-on learning and realistic workshops, including simulated sites for bricklaying, roofing and site management. There are many benefits to companies of that approach. In year 1, apprentices perform basic tasks under supervision, reducing the workload for skilled tradespeople; by year 2, apprentices take on semi-independent tasks, handling routine jobs; from year 3 onwards, apprentices work near-independently, doing complex tasks, and achieve a level 3 Scottish vocational qualification. They then qualify as tradespeople. It is estimated that, at that point, companies will start to see returns on the investment, with apprentices generating income of between £30,000 and £50,000 a year for employers.

We have the training facilities and the young people with an interest in construction. We just need employers, despite the challenges, to invest in their businesses' future.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to closing speeches. I advise that there is no time in hand.

16:49

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): This evening, Scottish Labour will support the motion, because the core point in it is crucial and the Parliament should speak as one on it.

Colleges have been hammered and, with them, so have the life chances of thousands of young people and others in Scotland. Audit Scotland is clear that enrolments are falling, targeted funds are being pooled and the funding model nudges colleges to offer cheaper credits instead of what local economies actually need.

The fact that student satisfaction remains above 90 per cent is not a pat-on-the-back moment for the SNP Government; it is a tribute to the staff who have held the line while funding has not. Colleges, students and employers have been sounding alarm bells for years, yet, when the Auditor General publishes a report, all we get from the Government is an amendment to entirely delete the reality and to instead pat itself on the back and point fingers. As my colleague Daniel Johnson said, this is not a good start for the new minister. The Government is in outright denial, and its continual failure to connect with reality will let down yet more staff and students and curtail futures.

We hear from ministers about the tough fiscal climate and a 2.6 per cent teaching uplift. Let us be straight: a one-year cash tweak does not undo five years of a 20 per cent real-terms hit. It should, as Willie Rennie said, cause the Government to shiver. Only the SNP Government could spin £5.2 billion extra in a budget as a tough deal.

16:53

Lorna Slater: In my opening remarks, I shared some of the frustrations that I have heard about apprenticeships and colleges. I think that there is a lot that we can do to improve both. I am hopeful that the implementation of the Withers review recommendations will shake some of this out and bring to the sector the strategy and dynamism that are desperately needed. College governance needs to be improved in order to prevent poor management decisions. Colleges need to be more flexible and adaptable to the changing needs for skills provision, and they need to work more closely with employers.

Some colleges are doing an excellent job of that, but some are not. Even while they are struggling, we must recognise that the contribution that colleges make is substantial and vital. Although I wish that we could focus solely on improving college and other education and training provision, I fear that we are in a situation in which we must work harder and more urgently to prevent its imminent decline.

My sympathies are with college staff across the country who face uncertainty about their future. There is huge uncertainty about the future of many of our local colleges. The University and College Union announced last night that staff at the University of the Highlands and Islands are likely to strike over planned redundancies. It is important to retain the current structure of local units, to keep further education colleges in place across the Highlands and Islands. That approach meets local needs and provides effective tertiary education, giving both further education and higher education equal importance. When Forth Valley College announced proposals to close the facility in Alloa, with an explanation that the three-campus model was no longer sustainable, a rally took place, which was attended by politicians, staff and students.

Local colleges allow people who would otherwise be excluded to access further education. For many people, it simply is not possible to travel long distances to study or to live away from home. We need to stop imagining that all students are young people who are moving out of their parents' home to study. We need to imagine them as people who have jobs and families and who need to upskill while still getting home every night and putting in enough solid shifts to pay the rent every week. We need to imagine students as disabled people who cannot travel far. We need to imagine them as people who have the complex and varied lives that people actually have, and who need skills and training to thrive and seize opportunities. That is the challenge that is ahead of us—to make skills and training available to more people under more flexible circumstances. We need to rethink how those skills are taught and what is taught using public money, to meet our strategic aims and to increase opportunity and reduce inequality.

We know that we have national skills shortages relating to our transition to a green and net zero economy. It would make sense to prioritise our limited funds in that direction. We can start with the basics: colleges should be living-wage employers and apprentices should be paid the living wage. We cannot build a better economy on the backs of people who are being paid poverty wages.

If there truly was “continued investment”, principals would not be cancelling courses, freezing recruitment and preparing for deficit budgets. As other members have said, the education system tells us that we need at least 34,000 modern apprenticeships to match Scotland's growth ambitions, but we are delivering just over 5,000.

We are running with the handbrake on. While the gap persists, one in six young people—16.1

per cent—are not in education, employment or training. That is untapped talent, which causes projects to slip back due to a lack of labour. If the SNP wonders why the Scottish Fiscal Commission tells it that there is an economic potential gap, it does not need to look further than that.

Colleges are not simply lines in a spreadsheet; they are the engine rooms of Glasgow, Aberdeen, Dundee, Inverness and our rural communities. They are where a school leaver learns a trade and where an adult learner retrains for a new career, as Lorna Slater and other members have pointed out. They are where key services and industries renew their skills. If we squeeze colleges, we squeeze social mobility and we choke growth.

Although the Government points fingers elsewhere, it is the SNP's funding decisions and the cap on apprenticeship numbers, which Scottish ministers control, that are holding Scotland back. I have listened to the members on the Government benches today: if they are denying that there is even a problem, it is no wonder that not one of them could give us a single solution. They are not the ones to fix the problem.

Scottish Labour recognises the struggles of colleges and we have a plan to help them. We will restore sustainable funding so that colleges can plan beyond a single year. We will lift the number of modern apprenticeship places, speed up the approval of new frameworks and make routes more flexible. We will put the needs of industry and our population at the heart of our policy, giving levy payers and small and medium-sized enterprises a real say—

Bob Doris: Will Pam Duncan-Glancy give way?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: She will be concluding shortly.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: We will start earlier in our schools, because skills are not just an add-on to exams; they are critical opportunities and critical to opportunity. We will grow practical learning, modern careers advice and proper work-based pathways.

This is about basic competence. It is about funding the places that we need to match the demand that we have, which the SNP has failed to do. This is about backing our colleges. When we do that, Scotland will feel the lift in pay packets, productivity and pride. Let us give our young people the certainty and the opportunities that they deserve, and give workforces the careers and skills that they deserve.

Let us back our colleges, back our apprentices and back Scotland's future.

16:57

The Minister for Business and Employment (Richard Lochhead): Many points have made in the debate. I will address some of them and rebut some of the claims that have been made by other parties in relation to our vibrant college sector.

Murdo Fraser started by talking down the Scottish economy. Although we agree that it is very tough out there in many ways, let us not forget that, since 2007, gross domestic product per person in Scotland has grown by 10.3 per cent compared with 6.8 per cent in the UK. Productivity is growing at an average rate of 0.9 per cent per year, compared with 0.3 per cent in the rest of the UK.

Murdo Fraser: I was not talking anything down; I was quoting from the survey that was published this morning by the Scottish Chambers of Commerce and the Fraser of Allander Institute. You will not listen to me, but why will you not listen to them?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Always speak through the chair.

Richard Lochhead: I would always rather listen to them than to you, with all due respect—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Always speak through the chair, please.

Richard Lochhead: I take on board the fact that it is very challenging out there. Our colleges have such a crucial role to play in ensuring that we have the skills that we need for the future economy and that we are helping young people to get on the ladder in life, and in opening up new opportunities and horizons for them.

I congratulate the colleges, schools and training providers on what they are achieving. In the 2024-25 academic year, 110,380 vocational and technical qualifications and awards were issued. That is a new landmark, and the numbers are up 21.6 per cent on the year before. I congratulate all the education providers who helped to achieve that. Also, as Ben Macpherson said in his opening remarks, 93 per cent of school leavers have a positive destination, which is something to celebrate.

Daniel Johnson said that the figure of 39,000 individuals that is mentioned in the Scottish Government's amendment misleads the Parliament, but that is a very accurate figure. The figure that he quoted was for the first quarter of this year, whereas the figure that we quote is the whole-year figure for last year. Clearly, the figures change throughout the year, so we have to use the annual figure and not the quarterly figure. Our figure is accurate and we have not misled the Parliament.

I would like to put on record the amazing work that our colleges are doing in Scotland. A few weeks ago, I had the honour of attending the 15th anniversary gala dinner of the City of Glasgow College, of which I am an alumnus, with the First Minister and many other people. I attended the predecessor college, the Central College of Commerce in Glasgow, in the mid-1980s. I was a lot younger then than I am now, and I graduated with a higher national certificate in business studies at that time. Here I am, standing in 2025 as Minister for Business and Employment in the Scottish Government, so I certainly benefited from my time at college, as have hundreds of thousands of young people across Scotland over the years.

I visited Glasgow Kelvin College just a few weeks ago. I was blown away by its innovation and its work to ensure that we have the right skills for the 21st century, teaching young people what they require for the new economy. It is working with six innovation hubs, involving a number of colleges that have received UK Government funding to take forward its innovation agenda. It is great to see that collaboration.

I also had the privilege of recently visiting Fife College and its fantastic new campus that is being built in Dunfermline. Fife College is excited about the future, as well; there is a lot of positivity out there.

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): The minister mentioned that he gained an HNC in business studies and that he had an opportunity. Such opportunities drive the economy; his opportunity found him a job. However, young people in the Borders are unable to get on to courses because they are being limited, and they cannot get jobs. The economy will suffer as a result.

Richard Lochhead: The leader of the UK Conservative Party was in the news over the past couple of days suggesting that cuts of £47 billion be made to public spending. The Scottish Conservative Party is here today arguing for more and more spending—in this debate, on further education—at the same time that the party is arguing for cuts to public spending. The Conservatives cannot have it both ways.

This is a very challenging time for public spending in Scotland. As we all know, it has been extremely challenging for the past few years. We have budget negotiations coming up in the next few weeks. The Conservative Party and the Labour Party will have an ideal opportunity to argue for greater budgets for the many different issues that they bring to the chamber for which they want bigger budgets. At the same time, they will be able to outline where they want cuts to take

place to ensure that we can fund the increases that they keep arguing for.

A number of issues have made life very challenging for colleges over the past few years. Every time that Brexit is mentioned, members of the Conservative Party in particular shake their heads and pretend that it is irrelevant. However, if we speak to any college in Scotland—or, indeed, to universities and the rest of the further and higher education sector—they will talk about Brexit and the impact that it has had on skills, as many members have mentioned, including, I think, Miles Briggs. They all mention Brexit, as well as the financial hit and the number of students from European countries who have been unable to come as easily as they used to to attend not only universities but colleges.

The idea that rising energy bills—energy is the responsibility of the UK Government—the Truss budget, which came from the Conservative Party, and the increase in employer national insurance contributions from the Labour Government do not have an impact on the finances of colleges is ridiculous. Of course they do, and that is what we are coping with.

It is a very tough subject, but we will continue to stand up for Scotland's colleges as we move forward. I urge the Parliament to back the Scottish Government's amendment.

17:02

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Just recently, the Deputy First Minister described colleges as the “engines of innovation” while she was announcing new schemes to help to turn research initiatives into high-growth businesses. That point was strongly welcomed by Scotland's chief entrepreneur, Ana Stewart. That was on the back of the Deputy First Minister's Panmure house speech in June, when she spoke very well about the need for greater collaboration between the public and private sectors to try to harness Scotland's true investment and economic growth potential.

As Willie Rennie reminded us, colleges are hugely important when it comes to stimulating economic growth. That is why, last week, Audit Scotland described colleges as a vital anchor in local communities and regional economies. Let us hear what college principals are saying. One said:

“To think that the sector could operate or indeed maintain provision after having our budgets slashed by 10 per cent last year was challenging, but to have them reduced again ... is just baffling.”

That college principal was Miles Dibsall of Telford College and he said that at the Education and Culture Committee back in 2011. That is well before Brexit, yet, since then, despite all the

rhetoric that we have had from various higher and further education ministers, we have seen an erosion of college sustainability.

John Vincent, the principal of Glasgow Clyde College, told the cross-party group on colleges and universities just last week that demand for apprenticeship places is very strong but that it cannot be met because of Scottish Government cuts. In other words, the SNP, with its financial constraints on colleges, is preventing some people from taking up work.

We have problems at Forth Valley College's Alloa campus, which is in the kind of area where we desperately need new training opportunities, and Fife College and the University of the Highlands and Islands are harbouring serious concerns about long-term sustainability. All of that puts in jeopardy valuable opportunities that should be designed to stimulate growth. If we are serious about addressing economic inactivity, improving skills and retraining and creating a more innovative and flexible labour market, it should go without saying that our colleges should be a priority for Government. It makes no sense at all to cut their budget in real terms by 20 per cent since 2021 and to strip out £141 million in real terms from the Scottish Funding Council. That is at a time when the overall block grant has been going up, despite what Mr McLennan said.

As has been said, colleges and other providers wanted 34,000 places in 2024-25, and the Scottish Government gave them 25,500. Scottish Engineering tells us that it thinks that a fifth of the skills demand has been unmet due to real-terms funding cuts. There is no policy logic to that at all, just as there was no policy logic in the SNP budget of two years ago, which cut the economy portfolio by 8.3 per cent in real terms, including cuts to employability and enterprise support and tourism. We know that more than half of businesses are experiencing skills shortages, with a high percentage of those being very pessimistic about the next five years.

Nor is there any policy logic in persistently increasing tax levels in Scotland, despite the evidence of employers—whether they are large-scale businesses such as Tesco or our smallest businesses in our high streets—or what the Fraser of Allander Institute and Scottish Chambers of Commerce said yesterday. It is clear that those tax policies are hindering our capacity to drive growth.

What is really important, and has been for a long time, is that the funding model for tertiary and higher education is not sustainable and needs to change, as Michael Marra and Lorna Slater said. We simply cannot have a situation in which 22 out of 24 colleges expect to spend more than their income this year, and in which the funding for a college student is a little more than £2,500 lower

than it is for a higher education student. I completely understand that there cannot be full parity, but neither should there be such a huge gap in income. Likewise, under some apprenticeship frameworks, colleges are being subcontracted to deliver training, but only 40 per cent of the Scottish Government funding reaches the college that is delivering the training. That just cannot be right.

For the sake of boosting the quality of Scottish tertiary and higher education, we on the Conservative benches are pleading with the Scottish Government to completely rethink its priorities and to be serious about the need to reform the funding model. If it does not do that, it will not only badly let down another generation of Scottish students but seriously undermine Scotland's competitiveness.

Ministers need to bear in mind that international trends show clearly that the further and higher education systems that are the most successful in focusing on teaching and research and the best educational outcomes, rather than on governance, are those that are at the greatest arm's length from Government. That is not a political point; it is one that reflects what works best in education. On that note, I support the motion in the name of Murdo Fraser.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate on backing Scotland's colleges and apprenticeships. There will be a short pause before we move to the next item of business.

Secure Accommodation

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a statement by Natalie Don-Innes on the capacity and future of secure accommodation. The minister will take questions at the end of her statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

17:09

The Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise (Natalie Don-Innes): Over the past year, I have updated Parliament several times on recent challenges in the provision of secure care in Scotland and on the actions that this Government has taken to address them.

I also committed to inform Parliament of work being undertaken to build on the strengths, address weaknesses, and deliver a sustainable, future-proofed system that is aligned with the Promise. In June, I published the Government's response to the report "Reimagining secure care: a vision for the future", which focuses on the actions that are necessary to achieve that.

I want to ensure that Scotland's secure care system treats children as children, with their rights and wellbeing at the heart of all decisions that are made with, for and about them.

That system must, by necessity, provide an intensive trauma-informed environment for the very small number of children whose needs in relation to safety, support and stability are acute. However, it must also aim to reduce the need for secure care through earlier, more effective intervention.

Our immediate priority is, of course, to stabilise and strengthen secure accommodation capacity. As of today, 11 secure care places are available. That relatively positive position is one that we have seen for the past four months. It comes as a result of close monitoring and collaboration to restore capacity and to build resilience in the system.

Recent actions that have been delivered include a commitment of up to £8.4 million in funding to cover the placement of sentenced and remanded children, and up to 16 beds across the secure estate to maintain capacity in 2025-26 and 2026-27. There has also been a commitment of up to £2 million in funding to support contingency actions in 2025-26, updated practice guidance on alternatives to secure care, which was published in March 2025, and a new four-bed national contingency resource, which opened in April at Rossie.

Significant work is under way to strengthen the provision of secure care, and access to it. Our

goal remains to uphold an effective and equitable system for children who might require secure care, recognising that placement decisions rest with independent courts, children's hearings, chief social work officers and secure accommodation providers.

Progress at St Mary's Kenmure is a key part of our recovery efforts, with staffing increases enabling a safe and sustainable extension of capacity. Government officials continue to provide support to help restore capacity and to meet Care Inspectorate requirements to enhance the quality of the service. We expect St Mary's to return to offering 14 places by the end of this month, and 16 by the end of 2025.

In July, the Good Shepherd Centre's board decided to temporarily restrict capacity from 18 to 12 beds to allow the centre to undertake physical remediation work and recruit to key roles. That temporary restriction has not adversely affected overall capacity across the secure estate, and Good Shepherd continues to accept referrals. When I visited the Good Shepherd Centre last week, I was advised that the board is meeting next week to consider restoration plans. I was encouraged to hear that it continues to make progress in Promise-keeping practice development, in particular in areas around reducing restraint, advancing violence reduction and restorative approaches. Government officials have been actively engaging with St Mary's and Good Shepherd to offer support to ensure the restoration of full capacity as soon as that is safely possible.

I am also determined to deliver greater resilience and longer-term sustainability in the sector. I therefore announce today that, subject to the necessary approval and registration, a further new four-bed national contingency resource at Rossie should be operational in early December. Those additional spaces provide the further contingency that our system may require in the longer term, not least to provide safe and appropriate care options for young people who will no longer be placed in young offender institutions, but whose offences still necessitate a deprivation of liberty.

However, the Promise Scotland has rightly highlighted the need to strike a careful balance between ensuring sufficient capacity to meet current demand without overprovision that could signal overreliance on deprivation of liberty and undermine longer-term sustainability. Planning in a systemic way for change is important. I therefore advise Parliament that we are working with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities to develop a joint action plan, bringing together local and national Government to co-ordinate efforts,

clarify responsibilities and drive progress in a coherent and collaborative way.

As announced in January, we have agreed to fund a dedicated professional lead within Social Work Scotland for a 12-month period, to strengthen support for placing authorities, and I am pleased to say that the successful postholder started work at the end of August. The aim is to enhance confidence and awareness among key professionals who work in that challenging environment and, through working closely with Government officials, placing authorities and providers, to support effective decision making and practice.

As members will be aware, the needs of children and young people are changing and, often, becoming much more complex. As acknowledged in our response to "Reimagining secure care", we need our future provision to evolve to meet emerging and developing needs.

Last month, I had the opportunity to visit Kibble and learn more about the support that it offers to children. For more than 160 years, Kibble has provided support and services to children and young people in Scotland, including the provision of secure care for young people up to the age of 18.

Kibble already provides care in three small group houses, which each accommodate up to six young people in a safe and nurturing environment with a consistent staff team that provides round-the-clock care and support. I announce today that the Scottish Government is working with Kibble to construct up to three future-proofed four-bed houses that are designed to create a trauma-informed environment and provide adaptable environments that respond to the evolving and complex needs of the children who are cared for. Those additional houses will not only add useful capacity to the secure care system and estate; they will help to signal our intent, which is shared with secure care providers and partner agencies, to develop what and how we provide in the future.

As we start to reimagine secure care for the future, it is important to gather views, knowledge and experience to inform the development of options. As part of the Government's response to the report "Reimagining secure care", I have committed to consulting on those options before the end of the parliamentary session. That includes the consideration of the future purpose of secure care, the routes into and transitions from it and the more practical aspects of how it will be provided in the future—including commissioning and contract management, and how best to co-ordinate a national response to the acute needs and interests of a very small number of children and young people from across the country, who

have a wide range of backgrounds and circumstances.

Placing children and young people with complex and acute needs in secure accommodation—sometimes far from family, often outwith their local community and sometimes for considerable periods of time—is one of the most serious things that we as a society do. We should not take that lightly. We should always be cognisant of our responsibilities to not just the children involved but the children’s panel members, the judiciary and the chief social work officers who have to make those decisions, the professionals who support that decision making and the people who provide care. A caring, professional, supported and supportive workforce is vital. The children and young people who are placed into secure care, either in short or longer-term situations, deserve nothing less.

I want everyone who works in and around those most difficult and complex circumstances to know that they are valued and appreciated and that we are committed to enhancing their capacity and confidence. Members in the chamber will want to echo that, and I welcome the close attention that many have paid in recent months to what is a most important issue in my portfolio.

My statement seeks to reassure members that, over the summer, our focus has very much been on addressing the immediate capacity issues. The interventions and the work that I have set out mean that we are achieving that. I am assured that the steps that we have taken and are taking will minimise the risk that the challenges that were experienced earlier this year will arise again. We are pressing forward with further positive capacity investment and interventions; we continue to work in close partnership with secure care providers, placing authorities and third sector organisations; and we are drawing on their expertise and commitment to ensure that every child receives the care and protection that they need, in safe and trauma-informed environments. In short, we are laying the foundations for a more sustainable and resilient system for the future.

I am happy to take questions.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The minister will now take questions on the issues that were raised in her statement. I intend to allow about 20 minutes for questions, after which we will move on to the next item of business. I encourage members who wish to ask a question but have not yet pressed their request-to-speak buttons to do so.

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): I thank the minister for advance sight of her statement.

The Scottish Conservatives have consistently warned ministers that the situation on the ground in our secure accommodation sector was not

sustainable. The minister’s statement demonstrates that the Scottish Government has failed to competently implement its policy to date, despite those warnings.

At the weekend, a story was reported in the *Sunday Post* regarding a vulnerable Aberdeenshire teenager, Callie Thomson, who has been inappropriately placed in all four of Scotland’s secure units since the age of 14. Callie, who has just turned 17, has now been discharged from the Rossie secure unit without a care package in place. She has been directed to homelessness services—a 17-year-old is being placed in homeless accommodation with people who have recently been released from prison and people with substance abuse issues. Callie said:

“I feel like I have been utterly abandoned, and nobody seems to care if I live or die.”

The destination on discharge from secure placements was not mentioned in today’s statement, but I am deeply concerned at the picture that is emerging. I believe that this will be the next big scandal to face the Scottish Government and shows its failure to meet the needs of some of the most vulnerable children and young people in our society. In 2024, 19 per cent of children were discharged with “other” recorded as their destination.

What is clear from today’s statement is that secure accommodation capacity across our country remains completely unstable. I ask the minister two questions. First, will she personally intervene and investigate the failings in Callie Thomson’s case? Secondly, given the continuing pressure facing wider children and young people’s services, will the minister undertake a review of the inappropriate placement of young people in adult homelessness services and adult mental health services?

Natalie Don-Innes: I cannot comment on individual cases, but I was very sorry to hear about that story. All children who are placed in care settings, including in secure accommodation, should expect to receive the highest standards of care. That includes when they leave secure accommodation, because we have pathways for that. Any decision to place a child in secure accommodation is taken by the relevant decision makers, including the independent courts, children’s hearings, chief social work officers and secure accommodation providers.

Mr Briggs asked me two questions. I am more than happy to look into the direct details of the case, because I am very concerned about what I am hearing. On the wider issue of housing services, I would be more than happy to discuss those issues directly with Mr Briggs after my statement.

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): I, too, thank the minister for advance sight of her statement.

In relation to the case that Miles Briggs has just raised, I think it is right to say that the Scottish Government would remain the corporate parent for that individual up until the age of 18 at the very least, so it does have a direct responsibility.

I have two questions. The evidence shows that we currently have 65 beds—I welcome the fact that provision will be expanded—and that, currently, 54 beds are occupied. Can the minister confirm, first, how many of those beds are occupied under cross-border placements and, secondly, how many are occupied by young people who are on remand from the court system? As the minister pointed out, there are a number of ways in which young people can end up in secure accommodation.

Natalie Don-Innes: I understand Mr Whitfield's point about the case that Mr Briggs referred to, and I have committed to looking directly into it.

In relation to the secure care numbers, I can confirm that six children from England and Wales are currently placed in Scotland on cross-border placements. I will have to get back to Mr Whitfield on the number of beds that are occupied children who are on remand—I will do so following my statement.

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): I welcome the publication of the Government's response to the "Reimagining Secure Care" report. St Mary's Kenmure, in my constituency, is an excellent facility, and I was pleased to hear the minister's announcement on capacity there.

What steps does the minister intend to take to develop secure care provision in the longer term? How can stakeholders engage with that work? What are the strengths of the current system? Where does the Scottish Government envisage changes potentially being required in the future?

Natalie Don-Innes: The Scottish Government is committed to building on the strengths of the system while embracing a future vision for change in line with the priorities that are laid out in "The Promise". That may involve radical change when and where improvements to children's experiences and outcomes demand it.

Our response to the "Reimagining Secure Care" report will be delivered over two phases: first, as I set out in my statement, on capacity restoration and reinforcement; and, secondly, on road-testing elements of reimagined secure care. The next steps include exploring the report's recommendations with partners in more detail, and establishing good practice examples and testing

out some of those approaches. As I confirmed in my statement, we are working with COSLA and Social Work Scotland on the development of a joint action plan, which will allow us to progress that work. I have also confirmed our commitment to consult on the future of secure care by the end of this parliamentary session, to ensure that we get the views of those who matter.

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): In her statement, the minister has hailed the establishment of another working group to deliver another action plan. Does she not accept that the Government should surely just get on with delivering the consistent capacity in secure accommodation that is so clearly needed?

Natalie Don-Innes: That is exactly what I have done today. I have informed Parliament of the actions that have already been taken—the introduction of a new four-bed house and a contingency plan. I also introduced two new capacity restoration actions today in relation to Kibble and Rossie. I agree with Mr Ross that we need to get on with ensuring capacity—that is exactly what we are doing. I am also focused on how we ensure that the system is fit for the future, and that is exactly what I read out in my statement.

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): It is vital that secure care is more than a holding centre—that it keeps communities safe and keeps young people safe from harming themselves. Children and young people need help to break the potential progression into poorer life chances in adulthood, and secure care can do that by giving them access to the same standard of education as their peers. They must also have their underlying health and wellbeing needs addressed. The system must be one where children are still treated as children, with their rights and wellbeing at the heart of all decisions.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Ask a question, please.

Jackie Dunbar: How can we ensure that that happens?

Natalie Don-Innes: I fully agree with the sentiments that Ms Dunbar has expressed. We know that children or young people who do not get those chances will have poorer outcomes. Secure accommodation is a specialised form of residential care and is designed to restrict the liberty of children who represent a significant risk to themselves or others. The primary aims of secure care are to keep children safe; to provide intensive support, therapeutic care and education; to help children—importantly—to re-engage with their communities; and to ensure that any deprivation of liberty is absolutely necessary, rights respecting and time limited.

Secure care providers work intensively to provide support that focuses on equal access to education, addresses health and wellbeing needs and creates a safe and nurturing environment. However, I fully recognise the extremely complex and demanding nature of the work of secure care providers and local authority teams. They play a challenging but vital role in supporting children with significant and often multifaceted needs. I am sure that all members agree with me and deeply value that dedication.

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): I thank the minister for advance sight of her statement.

Social Work Scotland told the Education, Children and Young People Committee that the system is already depleted and struggling, with the social work workforce effectively static over the past decade, while the volume of duties keeps rising. The minister says that the workforce is vital, and I whole-heartedly agree. During the passage of the Children (Care and Justice) (Scotland) Bill we warned the Government about the need to build the workforce first.

What specific actions are being taken to ensure that the workforce is supported and that the capacity is there to deliver the desired outcomes?

Natalie Don-Innes: We have taken a number of actions to improve retention and to improve support for the workforce. The Scottish Government fully recognises the pressure that the social work workforce is under. With sector partners, it is delivering on specific priorities to ensure that children and young people receive the level of care that they deserve. That is absolutely vital, as I have said in the chamber many times. We will only bring about systemic change to operational social work services by investing in those who provide those services—our workforce.

I have spoken before about the national social work agency that we will establish by April 2026 to support registered social work students, social workers and social work assistants across the public, third and independent sectors. National and local government also recognise the need to work differently and more closely together. Therefore, a national social work agency, COSLA and Social Work Scotland will work together as the Scottish social work partnership. As partners, they will share responsibility for a joint strategic plan to address the on-going issues across the social work workforce in Scotland. I assure the member that I hear what she is saying. There are active, on-going discussions about what we can do to bolster the workforce.

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): Some people have suggested that, now that a larger group of older young people with more serious offending will be able to be

detained in secure care, we will need to differentiate the approach in secure care on age grounds and we will need to separate those who are there on welfare grounds from those who are there on justice grounds. I am concerned by that. Does the minister agree that doing that would be unhelpful and that the founding principle of our care for children—that it is based on needs as well as deeds—still holds true?

Natalie Don-Innes: I agree that that would be very unhelpful. Not only is there no evidence to support the separation of children in that way, but it would be unworkable in practice and run completely counter to the aspirations of the Promise.

Although, for a small number of placements, the reason for a child to be accommodated in a particular setting will be that they have committed an offence, often things are not as clear cut as that. The reason for a placement is usually wrapped up in a number of wider considerations and broader welfare issues. Many of the children who have committed an offence are victims themselves. A rigorous matching process is in place, which safeguards children in those circumstances. When considering the referral of a child for admission to a secure care placement, the provider must carry out its own assessment of whether it can meet the needs of the child while also protecting the safety and welfare of other children in that setting.

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): The minister outlined investment to expand secure capacity. Will she detail parallel investment in community-based and preventative services that are designed to reduce the need for secure placements in the first place? Will she say more about how the joint action plan with COSLA will ensure that local authorities are resourced to intervene earlier so that secure accommodation is genuinely a last resort?

Natalie Don-Innes: Absolutely—the budget for 2025-26 includes an additional £11 million of support for community justice services and on-going work to further enable a shift away from the use of custody, which brings the total investment in community justice to £159 million, with a total increase in investment of £25 million over two years. That supports a range of community justice services, including diversion from prosecution, alternatives to remand, and community sentencing. That will help us to ensure that justice social work can continue to provide alternatives to custody in the community, when it is deemed appropriate.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): I acknowledge the minister's efforts in the past year to resolve this problem. However, this playing catch-up is typical of the Government's approach

to keeping the Promise. First, we read in the damning Audit Scotland report about the lack of planning by the Government over many years to deliver the Promise, which means that we are now behind schedule. Secondly, in the Education, Children and Young People Committee this morning, witnesses told us about the lack of engagement—and, again, planning—on the new Promise bill. Is the minister going to change the Government's approach to keeping the Promise?

Natalie Don-Innes: I welcome the Audit Scotland report and I will take time to consider its recommendations in full. I do not agree that it was damning; there were some real positives in there, and it was clear that we are still on track to deliver the Promise by 2030.

In relation to tracking progress, we have the Promise progress framework and "Plan 24-30"—there are several ways in which we are looking to track progress on the Promise. However, we need to be clear that it is not all about measurable data. There are real people and real lives. We know that the Promise is for transformational change—that is systemic change, and it is not going to happen overnight. Although there are aspects that are measurable, which we will track, there are also real lives at stake. The change that is happening on the ground, which is not always measurable, is very important, too.

Jamie Hepburn (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP): Decisions on placing a child in secure care are currently taken locally, and the process involves those who work closely with and support the child and their family. In relation to the "Reimagining Secure Care" report, the minister spoke about the co-ordination of a national response to support the interests and needs of what is a small number of children and young people. Will she expand on that and set out what it might mean in practice?

Natalie Don-Innes: Looking ahead, the Government remains absolutely committed to developing a more resilient and responsive system of secure care provision, with a strong emphasis on capacity preservation and placement management.

Scotland's secure care system does not currently have a placement commissioning mechanism or national oversight of placement decisions. We are exploring a future national approach to the placement of children in secure care that would involve that function being held by the national social work agency. The creation of a mechanism whereby a centralised approach was taken to the placement of children in secure care would assist placing authorities in securing a placement and would support better data collection.

Consideration would still have to be given to the issues of resource, remit, functions and costs, but central co-ordination would certainly help to ensure that placement decisions were based on need, rather than geography or availability, which would promote fairness and reduce regional disparities in access to secure care.

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): The minister said that

"we are laying the foundations for a more sustainable and resilient system for the future",

following the challenges that were experienced earlier this year. I welcome some of the announcements that she has made today. However, when I was convener of the Education, Children and Young People Committee, I warned the minister of the very issues that we are discussing today 30 months ago, back in June 2023. In its stage 1 report on the Children (Care and Justice) (Scotland) Bill, the committee made it clear that capacity was a significant concern. Why did the minister not heed those warnings 30 months ago and act then?

Natalie Don-Innes: As I set out in my statement and as The Promise Scotland has made clear, we do not want to have overcapacity. Obviously, the situation that we were in last December, which went on for some months after that, was extremely difficult, but we have taken the necessary steps and action. We are now in a much better place—today, 11 secure places are available, and a range around that number has been available for the past couple of months. I have set out how we plan to re-envision that provision for the future in order to future proof it. I take heed of Ms Webber's comments and thank her for bringing those matters to my attention.

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): Does the minister think that it is right, going forward, for secure care to be provided by a series of independent organisations that all do things differently and which are accountable to their boards, rather than to the Scottish ministers?

Natalie Don-Innes: As I noted in my statement, although the immediate focus has been on stabilisation, capacity restoration and encouraging the safe use of alternatives, we must always look forward in an effort to future proof the system.

We are considering future funding and commissioning models as part of our plans for reimagining secure care. We will work in partnership with Scotland Excel, secure providers and commissioning authorities to consult on and co-design a new national commissioning model that reflects our shared aspirations for the future of secure care. That process will consider potential changes in funding and commissioning

arrangements to better serve the needs of Scotland's children.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the item of business. Before we move to the next item, there will be a brief pause to allow front-bench teams to change over.

Climate Change (Scotland) Act 2009 (Scottish Carbon Budgets) Amendment Regulations 2025

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a debate, in the name of Gillian Martin, on the Climate Change (Scotland) Act 2009 (Scottish Carbon Budgets) Amendment Regulations 2025. Members who wish to participate in the debate should press their request-to-speak buttons now or as soon as possible.

17:40

The Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Energy (Gillian Martin): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak to the Climate Change (Scotland) Act 2009 (Scottish Carbon Budgets) Amendment Regulations 2025. In the interests of time, I will now refer to those as “the regulations”.

As members will be aware, the Parliament approved the move to carbon budgets last year, with no party voting against it. The 2009 act requires that ministers seek advice from the Climate Change Committee when setting those carbon budgets. The CCC published its advice on carbon budgets for Scotland on 21 May. The Scottish Government considered that advice at pace and, on 19 June, it laid, in draft, regulations to set the carbon budgets in legislation and provide new emissions reduction targets two months earlier than the statutory deadline for doing so. The reason that we did that earlier was to enable Parliament to approve the carbon budget levels for each five-year period up to 2045 in time for the start of the first carbon budget period on 1 January 2026.

I must be absolutely clear that, if the regulations are not agreed to today, there is a high and real risk that no carbon budgets can be put in place before 1 January 2026—in the first year of Scotland's carbon budgets, as voted for by this Parliament—because of the time that would be required for the laying, scrutinising and passing of replacement regulations. That would, of course, also mean that we would be unable to finalise our next climate change plan during this session of Parliament.

The five-year carbon budgets that we proposed will limit the amount of greenhouse gases that Scotland will emit until 2045. The carbon budgets in the regulations have been set at the levels advised by the Climate Change Committee, which I thank for its comprehensive advice. Since then, the regulations have been scrutinised by the Parliament's Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee, and I take the opportunity to thank that committee for its work. In particular, I thank its

members for producing their report in sufficient time to allow today's vote to take place before the October recess.

This Government's commitment to tackling the climate emergency remains unwavering, and enshrining carbon budgets in legislation is a crucial step towards our net zero goal. I understand that there is concern across the chamber about the planned timeline for the upcoming climate change plan. I state that I have done everything that I can to give Parliament time to scrutinise the plan in advance of the next election. As I outlined to the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee, it remains our intention to publish a draft climate change plan in the autumn, to allow sufficient time for the final version to be published before the end of this session of Parliament.

We intend to address the results of the consultation on the climate change plan as an iterative process, throughout the scrutiny period, which will not be limited to the weeks between the conclusion and the publication date. I reassure members that, although time is tight, I am confident in the proposed timelines. However, if the statutory instrument is not passed today, the timeline set out just will not be achievable.

Throughout the passage of the Climate Change (Emissions Reduction Targets) (Scotland) Act 2024, members agreed on the importance of receiving advice from our independent advisers before legislating for carbon budgets. In fact, some argued that the Government should be compelled to accept in law the carbon budgets recommended by the CCC. I am grateful to the CCC for providing its advice as quickly as possible.

I hope that my laying of the regulations weeks earlier than is required by statute is proof of my commitment to meeting the proposed timeline and the wishes of all parties, which asked for a climate change plan to be in place by the end of this parliamentary session. However, I again stress that that will be feasible only if the regulations to set carbon budgets are passed today.

The Parliament has, in the past, been united on the need for ambitious climate targets, in the face of increasing anti-climate rhetoric. I urge members to remain steadfast in our commitment to climate science and the need for strong climate action.

In parallel with the laying of the regulations, we published a statement that included information on the types of policies under consideration for inclusion in the next climate change plan. I understand that the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee wished to receive further details on those policies in advance of the vote on carbon budgets. However, providing additional detail on policies beyond that which is contained in

the statement is akin to publishing a draft climate change plan.

In the committee, members suggested that they could not vote on the Scottish statutory instrument without seeing that draft climate change plan. I have never said that a draft climate change plan could be produced before the carbon budgets were agreed—it is simply not possible. Indeed, the 2024 act, which was passed with cross-party support, clearly outlined the sequence of events that would lead to a final climate change plan. We cannot produce a plan setting out how our targets will be met without certainty on what the targets are; I have always been clear on that.

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): The Government has already said that it will not be accepting some of the proposals from the United Kingdom Climate Change Committee—for example, around agriculture. If you are not accepting some of the CCC's recommendations, can you tell us what you will put forward instead to make up the gap from the savings that are not being made?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Always through the chair.

Cabinet secretary, I can give you the time back.

Gillian Martin: As I said, I gave the committee and members an indication of the types of policies that were being pursued in the climate change plan. However, that plan will contain the level of detail that is required by the legislation. We wanted to rule out some policies that the Climate Change Committee advised, because we felt that the proposals for those were causing uncertainty, in particular among those in the agriculture sector. We wanted to make clear our support for the sector and our disagreement with the policies that the CCC had put to us.

Parliament will have 120 days in which to scrutinise the plan—

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): Will the cabinet secretary give way on that point?

Gillian Martin: No, I am going to proceed. There is an hour's debate for members to put forward their views, and I will respond at the end.

Parliament will have 120 days in which to scrutinise the plan, alongside a 12-week public consultation to invite views more widely. That consultation will be timed to enable us to have detailed conversations on the content of the draft climate change plan. It is of the utmost importance to me that we bring people along with us on this journey. My door has always been open, and it remains open to any member in the chamber who wishes to engage with me. However, I remind members that reaching net zero by 2045 remains

a legal obligation. That has never been in question, nor is it in question that reaching it will require cross-party consensus on the difficult policy decisions that are required to get there.

Today, Parliament has the opportunity to solidify in legislation Scotland's path to net zero; to reiterate our commitment to addressing this challenge head on; and to focus on continuing to drive forward action for the benefit of our communities, now and for generations to come. I urge Parliament to take that opportunity and meet the expectations of the public, who want us to act. My thanks go to those organisations that have reached out to MSPs to ask them to vote for the instrument, which sets in train that action.

17:48

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): I agree that this piece of legislation is vital, but, once again, such legislation is being rushed through the parliamentary process. Climate change legislation has been delayed and obfuscated, and is now, I feel, at serious threat of running out of parliamentary time before the dissolution of Parliament. It is important that the instrument is looked at closely, because we do not know what the costs or the impact on families will be as a result of what we are being asked to agree to today.

We have before us an SSI on carbon targets that has come before the climate change plan, for which we have waited and waited. A plan was promised in 2023, and now, more than two years later, we are promised that it will be published by the end of October so that the Parliament—and, more importantly, the public—will have an opportunity to consider, be consulted on, respond to and shape that most important strategy.

However, we are now being told that a plan cannot be published until the targets are set. We remain mystified as to why that has to be the order of things. Why are we agreeing targets when we have no idea how the Government plans to meet them? How can we say yes to the end point, without understanding the process of how we are going to get there? That was the mistake that was made last time.

How can we be sure that all our communities and, most importantly, those who are living in poorer or rural communities, are properly consulted on the impact that the targets will have? I hope that there will be some common sense about wood-burning stoves, for example, because, as Jim Fairlie tweeted during the storm last week, he had his

“wee stove keeping us warm”.

It is a good job that his party's plan to ban them was derailed by the campaign that was led by the Scottish Conservatives.

When looking at the SSI and the amendments, the committee raised some significant concerns and asked for clarity from the Government.

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): Mr Lumsden, I think that you might be conflating—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Through the chair, please.

Bob Doris: Presiding Officer, I believe that Mr Lumsden is conflating the climate targets with the climate change plan that the Parliament and wider society will be consulted on. We will be able to influence and change it in the coming months. Mr Lumsden is a bit confused.

Douglas Lumsden: I think that that is where Mr Doris is confused. We are being asked to approve targets, without knowing how we are going to achieve them. We do not know whether they will be achievable. I feel that we should have had the plan at the same time as the targets.

The committee wanted clarity on the estimated costs of each policy and detail on how each estimate had been calculated; how actions set out in the long-awaited climate change plan will link with the annual budget process, which requires urgent action, given that we will have a budget in a few months; details of the publication of other related strategies, bills and plans, alongside the draft climate change plan; and modelling of emissions reductions for areas where the Scottish Government intends to reduce emissions at a different rate to the Climate Change Committee's model, such as agriculture, which I asked about earlier.

We also need clarity on timing. Although the Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Energy has pledged to have the climate change plan in place before the Parliament is dissolved, time is tight: the draft has to be laid, the Parliament has to consider it and the public need to be consulted and their views taken into account. On 9 September, the cabinet secretary reassured the committee that the Government had confidence that the timetable could be met. I remind the chamber that we first expected the climate change plan in 2023.

I am sorry if I do not share the cabinet secretary's confidence. While the devolved SNP Government has wasted two years developing the policy, the world has moved on: Britain's domestic energy prices are now the second highest in the world and its industrial electricity prices are the highest in the world. Almost half the cost of

producing electricity in Britain results from net zero spending, taxes and levies.

Kate Forbes (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP): I have two quick questions. Did the member vote for the net zero targets to be achieved by 2045? Secondly, did the member's party do anything to reduce energy prices while it was in office?

Douglas Lumsden: I am coming on to my party's plan to reduce energy prices. The world has changed a lot since many of those targets were made. We are being asked to approve uncosted budgets, and I do not think that we are in a position to do that.

A third of the wholesale price of electricity is made up of the carbon tax. The Climate Change Committee has accepted that that is a policy choice that is designed to aid the transition to net zero. Ed Miliband's decision to double the subsidies for offshore wind in 2008 means that many wind farm developers are paid almost three times the market price for their output. This week, the Conservatives pledged to axe the carbon tax, scrap extortionate wind subsidies and repeal the Climate Change Act 2008 to cut energy bills for everyone. Carbon reduction targets force Governments to take decisions that increase the cost of energy, make people poorer and make businesses unsustainable, which impacts our rural and remote communities in particular.

By axing the carbon tax for electricity generation, we would immediately save people money on their bills. It would mean money in their pockets for everyone as well as money off energy bills. By scrapping renewable subsidies, we would put money directly into everyone's pockets. Those are commonsense solutions that would put money back into the pockets of hard-working Scots. While we wait two years for the SNP to come up with a plan to make us all poorer, the Scottish Conservative Party is looking at what will make us all better off.

We want cleaner energy and we want to meet our global responsibilities on climate change, but we can do that through providing cleaner nuclear energy and by using our domestic supply of oil and gas instead of relying on imports.

We oppose the SSI that has been laid before the chamber and encourage colleagues to hold the devolved SNP Government's feet to the fire. The SSI would write a blank check for unlimited costs to meet arbitrary targets. The majority of the committee's members did not approve those targets—they abstained.

I do not have confidence in the targets, the timeframes, the plan—or lack of one—to cut emissions or the Government's ability to deliver change for the Scottish people.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I advise the chamber that we have no time in hand and have a lot of business to conduct before the end of play, so members will need to stick to their speaking-time allocations.

17:55

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): This debate is crucial. We all know that we are here because the Scottish Government did not meet its annual climate targets in nine out of 13 years, even though the targets were capable of being met. Without a comprehensive and specified plan, there is no way that we will meet the purported targets on our way to net zero. The United Kingdom Climate Change Committee is clear that the 75 per cent emissions target for 2030—five years away—will not be met until 2036.

To be clear: we support the principle of legally binding carbon targets. However, we urgently need a plan to deliver on them, and we do not have that.

We are in a climate emergency. We are seeing wildfires and flooding not only in southern Europe and east Asia but in Scotland. This week, the Scottish Environment Protection Agency issued water scarcity warnings across key parts of Scotland while, at the same time, during storm Amy, communities were cut off from electricity and suffered flooding. We are going to get more and more extreme weather hitting communities and businesses, so we urgently need action and a plan from the Scottish Government. We need an acceleration in emissions reductions, investment in adaptation to protect communities and businesses, and a focus on the highest emissions, on targeting, on mitigation and on the adaptation of our homes, buildings, transport, land and industry. However, when we discussed that at the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee, it was striking that there was no detail about the implementation of the plan, and that is critical. Of course, we will need not only a plan but robust sector-specific strategies.

I will focus mostly on housing, because there is much more that we could do and must do in that area. The UK Committee on Climate Change says that, by 2035, the majority of homes should be heated using low-carbon electrical heat networks. Although we have standards to reduce emissions in new buildings and the requirement for some form of renewables to be used, we urgently need to see more support for existing households to decarbonise in a way that is affordable. I have regularly pushed the Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Energy on the issue of the end of support for home owners to install solar panels before they install a heat pump. The cabinet secretary always says that budgets are tight, but

this year the Scottish Government got an additional £5.2 billion from the UK Government.

It is not only the cabinet secretary who has responsibility for doing what needs to be done, because every part of the Scottish Government needs to invest in climate adaptation to support local supply chains, create jobs, reduce people's bills and cut our emissions.

Last week, when I was at the Labour conference, I attended a raft of meetings focusing on the positive impacts of investment in community solar projects, the work to make people's homes more energy efficient—which, again, is a win-win—and investment in local communities. We need a retrofit revolution in Scotland now, but we are not seeing it yet.

The missed opportunities in relation to homes and buildings are massive. Every local authority now has a heat network strategy, as requested by the Scottish Government, but the Scottish Government needs to step up and have a plan.

In my region, we have massive opportunities. For example, in the Shawfair development, Midlothian Council's publicly owned heat network has powered 3,500 new homes with energy from waste. We could have such projects across the region. The Berwick bank offshore wind project will come online soon but, without a joined-up approach, the Government will pay the developers to turn off the turbines when we have too much electricity. Why not link it with other networks now and support our local authorities?

It is good that the Cabinet Secretary for Transport is here. People across the country need public transport and the infrastructure that lets them use their electric vehicles and makes it affordable for freight and logistics businesses to decarbonise.

More needs to be done to enable land use to help reduce emissions, with the right support for our agricultural communities, because climate change and extreme weather create not only new challenges but opportunities to deliver Scottish-produced food and to enable our natural environments, such as peatlands, to make a significant contribution to our goals.

However, we have discussed these issues for years. As we debate the SSI, it is deeply disappointing that we do not have a plan. If we had a plan that we could debate at the same time, we could target the areas where we need more action.

Kate Forbes: Will the member take an intervention?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: No, there is no time.

Sarah Boyack: We will not vote against the carbon targets tonight; we will abstain, because we urgently need to see the detail from the Scottish Government, as well as its long-delayed energy strategy, for which we have been waiting for more than two years.

18:00

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): I will start by reflecting on where we are in this journey. We have already used up nearly half the time from the first climate act to the 2045 target. In that time, we have fallen behind schedule, with a series of missed targets. The only rational response to falling behind schedule is to speed up, yet some people seem determined to advocate the very opposite.

The easy bit has been done already; from here on, it gets harder, and we have long known that that was going to be the case. It is not just technically harder; it is politically harder, too. That is shown by the way that the political parties of the increasingly extreme right are breaking the consensus and dropping support for any credible climate policy. It is also shown by the lack of urgency that we are seeing from the SNP.

Four years ago, the Greens agreed to join the Government, and a large part of our motivation in doing so was to restore that urgency, especially in three key areas that have not seen enough progress. One is cutting road traffic, which the Scottish Government knows needs to happen to address climate change and to cut local air pollution. Another is pressing ahead with a credible programme on clean heating, which is an area where the policy experts had previously been held back by the politicians, despite the unarguable need to decarbonise by ditching fossil fuel heating. Finally, on land use, a change in the nature of subsidy and support offers opportunities for reduced emissions and strong rural economies, meeting the need for healthier diets.

Now, however, on all three of those key issues, far from accelerating action to make up for lost ground, the SNP is slowing down. A 20 per cent target to cut car traffic has been dropped—not revised, as the Government originally announced, as there has been no replacement for that target.

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): Will the member give way?

Patrick Harvie: I am afraid that I do not have time—I have only four minutes.

The heat in buildings bill, which is already wildly overdue, has only a few months left to pass through Parliament. To me, that confirms the suspicion that the Government has filleted it of any serious delivery mechanisms. The Scottish policy

landscape, including on climate, is littered with targets that were introduced with no mechanism to deliver. It now seems clear that the Government intends to do the same again on clean heat. The Government is also rejecting the advice of the UK Climate Change Committee on how to cut agriculture emissions.

So far, there is no indication of any alternative actions that can compensate for the watered-down climate change policies in those three key areas. The Greens recognise that carbon budgets must be set if we are to see a new climate change plan come forward. That plan is urgent—after all, it is actions that cut emissions, not targets or budgets. Therefore, we will not oppose the carbon budgets, but it seems clear that, instead of accelerating action, the SNP is slowing down in key areas. I cannot begin to see how any climate plan that it produces in those circumstances can get Scotland back on track in cutting emissions.

I expect the SNP to go into next year's election with a lacklustre plan. Instead of asking voters to compare that plan to what the science demands, the SNP will ask for a comparison with the increasingly denialist and defeatist stance on the political right. The Greens, meanwhile, will continue to bring forward the bold actions that are necessary to bring down emissions fast and achieve the healthier, fairer and more equal society that we know is possible.

18:04

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): The cabinet secretary surely must know that the Parliament is sceptical, and it is right to be sceptical, because we have been here before. The Government spent years boasting about world-leading climate change targets, but we did not have a world-leading climate change plan to go along with those. So when the Government eventually had to concede that it was not going to meet those climate change targets and we in the chamber accepted that that was inevitable, we thought that the Government might have learned its lesson and that it would have a plan to match the targets.

I understand that the process is difficult, but the cabinet secretary will have to go further to convince us because of that scepticism. Chris Stark, who sat on the Climate Change Committee, which we all respect, described setting targets with no idea about how to meet them as the “sugar rush” phase. That is the phase that we are in now—it feels great to set carbon targets without spelling out the difficult stuff that needs to be done. I accept that it is hard to do those things—if it was easy, we would have done it ages ago—but the longer we take to set out the details that we expect people to follow, the harder it will get.

Gillian Martin: Does Willie Rennie not agree that, if the Parliament votes down the targets today, what he wants me to do in setting out a climate change target will become impossible, as I will have to set out new budgets and a new climate change plan will have to be drafted to meet those targets?

Willie Rennie: The cabinet secretary is setting out a false choice. At no stage did I say that I would vote against the targets. I am urging the minister to reflect on the fact that people are sceptical about the Government's ambition. She will have to work harder to convince us that she will come forward with a meaningful plan that allows enough time for various sectors across the country to implement it. That is all that we are saying. I think that the minister can see that it is reasonable for us to be sceptical, because, as I say, we have been in this position many times over many years—a position where the Government has failed to come up with the details.

Today, my friend Brian Whittle and I were at the Energy Efficiency Association. The energy efficiency sector should be vibrant and bubbling. It should be buzzing away with installers who are desperate to keep up to speed with demand. However, the association was so downbeat today, because the Government has devised a scheme that is bureaucratic and slow for applying for grants. The sector should be desperate to take on apprenticeships and workers to meet that demand, but it is not.

We are losing sectors' confidence that the Government means what it says. Farmers have been waiting for years to get the future agricultural support scheme in place. The target of the beginning of the next decade for a massive reduction in carbon emissions was looming, but we did not have that for years; it took a long time. Farmers wanted a plan so that they would know what to work for. People are innovative; they can change and adapt to what is expected of them. We have seen that before when targets and plans have been set out for sectors. However, if we keep on punting it into the future because it is a bit too difficult, we will not be able to meet the targets that will be passed through the Parliament today.

I hope that the minister will take that message on board and that she understands that she will have to work harder to convince us.

18:08

Michael Matheson (Falkirk West) (SNP): It is worth reflecting on why we are in this position. Last year, the Parliament collectively came together and agreed that we should move to a carbon budgeting system such as that used in other jurisdictions. We recognise that it will provide

greater clarity, transparency and accountability around how we go about achieving our climate targets and the policies that will be deployed in order to do so. The reason why we are making that shift is that the annual targets that we set became a very cluttered environment, with catch-up plans and so on, and it became increasingly difficult for the Parliament to scrutinise exactly what was going on and how the targets were going to be achieved. Based on the evidence that we have seen from other jurisdictions and from the Climate Change Committee, there is no doubt that carbon budgets will improve that process over a multiyear period, providing a more reliable way for the Parliament and parliamentarians to scrutinise the process.

As we move into the second phase of tackling climate change, having achieved over half of the targets so far, it will be critical that we deliver stability, consistency and ambition—backed by investment—in order to make sure that we can deliver the targets that have been set. Some might want to portray that as being because we continued to miss our targets over a number of years. I listened carefully to Willie Rennie, and I accept that he is sceptical about those matters, but it is worth reflecting on the fact that the 2045 target was set collectively by the Parliament despite the fact that, at the time, the advice from our independent advisers on the Climate Change Committee was that there was no credible pathway for achieving net zero by 2045. We, in the Parliament, must reflect on the need to listen to advice on matters relating to the decisions that we make. It is critical that we do so.

I recognise that there are some issues of process. Ideally, we would have had the climate change plan before we considered the regulations. However, having passed the act, and given where we are now in this parliamentary session, the risk is that, if we do not pass the regulations, we are in default of the 2009 act and have to go back to the start. I would, ideally, like to have the climate change plan to scrutinise as well, but I recognise that we are not in a position to achieve that, given the very limited time that we now have.

Sarah Boyack: Will the member take an intervention?

Michael Matheson: I have only four minutes, I am afraid.

The idea of the conflict between economic growth and the environment is a false dichotomy, at times. It is presented particularly by the Conservative Party, which has abandoned the climate change and net zero agendas just as it has abandoned the 2050 targets at the UK level. The reality is that the transition to net zero provides huge economic opportunities for us as a country. However, in order to achieve that, we

have to create the type of stability around the policy environment and policy choices that will allow businesses and industry to invest in those areas. The flip-flopping that we hear from the Conservative Party, in particular, only undermines the confidence that we need to create if we are to attract the investment, jobs and opportunities that will go with meeting our climate change targets in the years ahead.

18:12

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands)

(Con): I want to make it clear at the outset that, although I am a member of the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee—I am its convener—I speak in the debate as an individual. In case anyone asks me questions on farming, which I am delighted to talk about, I also declare that I have an interest in a farm in Moray.

We are in a difficult position. Budgets have been produced that the committee and the Parliament have had to consider. The problem is that they are not like any other budget that I, as an individual, have ever looked at in my entire career. We are told that we are to achieve targets but not how we will achieve them, the route to achieving them or the costs. That causes me problems.

If the Parliament is to have a climate change plan, the most important thing is that we move forward in a credible way and take the people of Scotland with us. If we do not do that and families do not know what it will cost them and how much they will have to invest in it, when they come to the stage at which it gets tougher, as Patrick Harvie suggested—as we get closer to the targets—they will start to balk at the route that they are taking. We cannot afford that.

I will concentrate my speech on the fact that we are getting very close to the back end of this parliamentary session. What concerns me is that we have delayed the process because of the way that it has been changed, and we are still at the stage of approving or disapproving the carbon budgets, but a climate change plan will not be laid in front of the Parliament before the end of October or early November. The cabinet secretary has said that she aims to produce it at that point. That is only an aim. I would much rather know that she will produce it, so that it can be discussed.

We will then go through a process of 12 weeks of public consultation and work by parliamentary committees. There will probably then be a month in which to summarise those views. For those who can do the maths—I am sure that all members can—that takes us to March, giving us about 27 days in March, not all of which are sitting days, to go through the climate change plan. Once that process has finished, the Government will have 90

days in which to lay its climate change plan before the Parliament. If it chooses not to lay the final climate change plan after the consultation, the Parliament will be in a situation in which the plan does not come to fruition.

I seek some certainty from the cabinet secretary that she will do more than just aim to lay the draft climate change plan by the end of October and that she will do it by the end of October. If she cannot do that, she should give the Parliament an assurance that it will be done before 7 November, so that we will have time to get through the process, do the right thing and consider the climate change plan. I hope that, when the cabinet secretary gets a chance to speak, unless somebody else sums up, she will clarify whether the Government is going to do that rather than just say that it aims to do it.

18:15

Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland)

(Lab): On our current trajectory, the planet is heading for life-threatening temperature increases of 2.6°C to 3.1°C by the end of this century. Climate breakdown is already upon us, and my constituents in the north-east are experiencing it in real time—we have prolonged drought, record wildfires and violent storms. The damage and destruction seem only to increase year on year.

Yet, it is in this context that the Scottish Government chose to pull its heat in buildings bill, scrap its car-kilometre reduction target and ditch its legally binding target for reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 2030. Why on earth has it done that, and why at a time like this? It was not because the Government had to, and it was not because the reduction could not be done; it was because of the Government's own inaction, year after year, for 18 long years. That is why we are debating the setting of carbon budgets today. However, with scant detail and without much of a plan from the SNP, the carbon budgets will be cold comfort to those in my region who are at the sharp end of climate change.

Domestic and commercial energy use, including heating, accounts for 20 per cent of Scotland's emissions. Indeed, the UK spends more money on wasted domestic heating than any other country in western Europe. Inefficient boilers combined with poorly insulated walls and roofs cost us a fortune in energy bills. Meanwhile, some rogue operators are going around cashing in by flogging inappropriate so-called insulating solutions that cause havoc in old buildings and lead to damp, mould and costly repairs. However, there is another way: a national retrofit plan to reduce our reliance on imported gas and create thousands of well-paid, unionised jobs in construction, manufacturing and fitting. Those builders,

plumbers and joiners would all be trained and deployed here, in Scotland.

That is not all. The second-largest emitting sector, with almost 20 per cent of Scotland's emissions, is agriculture. Food production is absolutely essential to our nation and to my region, but it does not have to cost the earth. It is possible to balance the land needs of crops, livestock and wildlife and reap the benefits of all of those by promoting climate and nature-friendly farming, by breaking up land monopolies and by supporting smallholdings, tenant farms and crofts. There can be a farming revolution in which farming enhances nature and we are all better off for it.

There is still more that we can do. The nationalisation of ScotRail in 2022 was our chance to make a real difference for Scotland's energy transition. However, the SNP Government is missing this opportunity and throwing away a chance to decarbonise transport while creating a reliable, affordable public service.

Fiona Hyslop: Will Mercedes Villalba give way on that point?

Mercedes Villalba: I am afraid that I do not have time.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The member is just winding up.

Mercedes Villalba: Labour wants a clean, green electrified rail network that drives down emissions and gets people out of traffic and pollution and into work. The Scottish Government can and must do more to encourage a society-wide modal shift from road to rail for passengers and freight, to keep pace with the ambitious carbon budgets and emissions reduction targets. We must accelerate the electrification and decarbonisation of Scotland's railways.

Home heating, agriculture and transport are devolved areas, so we have the power here, in Scotland, to make a change for the better. What we need, whether through climate targets or carbon budgets, is action. My constituents need a Government that will tackle the issue head on—not after the election, not in five years' time, but right here, right now, before it is too late.

18:20

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife)

(Green): I find it incredible that Parliament is being asked to back a set of carbon budgets with no accompanying plan that spells out the action that is needed to deliver them. Members have talked about learning the lessons from 2019. Surely the biggest lesson from that was that, if we are going to set ambitious targets, we need to face up to the action that is required to deliver them and the benefits that will come from doing so.

I must tell the cabinet secretary that, when Douglas Lumsden, Sarah Boyack, Patrick Harvie and Willie Rennie are all reflecting the same concern, she has lost the confidence of the chamber on the issue. It is really important that we give sectors the confidence to go forward, but that requires detail. We have sectors that are prepared to step up, such as the air-source heat pump industry. Willie Rennie mentioned other sectors that want to go further and faster, but they need certainty now about what will be in the plan.

I do not believe for one minute that the draft climate change plan is not ready. Of course it is. Of course it has been signed off by the Cabinet, because it will be laid in a matter of weeks. Why does the Government refuse to let Parliament see its proposed action ahead of setting the carbon budget? Is it because the plan spells out policies that are so radical that the fear is that members of the Scottish Parliament would not back the budget, or is it that the commitment to real action on buildings, transport and agriculture is so weak? Time will tell, but we are being asked to back a level of ambition without a clear, credible plan for action. It is for those reasons that the Greens will abstain on the regulations tonight.

The Government has taken a pick'n'mix approach to adopting the Climate Change Committee's advice—and it is entitled to do so. However, action must still add up to the carbon budget. To be clear, the Government has ignored the Climate Change Committee's advice on reducing livestock numbers. On that policy alone, 1 megatonne of emissions will now have to be cut from somewhere else in society. Who will deliver that missing megatonne?

The cabinet secretary for net zero said in committee that transport will pick up the slack, but when the Cabinet Secretary for Transport came to the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee yesterday, there was no clarity—there was just hope and enthusiasm for the sale of electric vehicles. There will not even be a commitment to incorporating the findings of the A96 climate compatibility assessment into the climate change plan. How do we know where we are going? How do we know that the Government's actions will add up and that we will be able to deliver the reductions in the budget?

It is not good enough. A lack of ambitious action already means that we will not reach the goal of cutting emissions by three quarters until 2036. We have lost six years in the middle of a climate crisis. Without credible action, Scotland risks overshooting the even weaker carbon budgets. We cannot afford to do that. The planet cannot afford to wait. People cannot afford to wait for a greener, fairer Scotland. We need climate action now to deliver that. That is why it is important that

the detail comes forth. It should have been here, ahead of the regulations being laid in Parliament, but it has not been delivered. We will wait to see whether the Government's actions add up.

18:23

Sarah Boyack: It is really striking that there is huge support across the Parliament for strong action to tackle the climate and nature emergency.

I thank the stakeholders who got in touch with us before today's debate. WWF Scotland commented that the

“Scottish Government's Indicative Statement falls short of what is needed to inspire confidence in delivery ... Without a credible plan ... Scotland risks overshooting its carbon budgets.”

It argues that the upcoming climate change plan should include

“sector-specific ... plans, costed policy pathways”

and

“alignment with the annual budget process”.

I could not agree more. We need a plan, across the Scottish Government, that goes on every year. As I said earlier, that is not just the job of the cabinet secretary but of the whole Government.

WWF Scotland also quotes the Scottish Fiscal Commission, which estimates that timely action will require about £0.7 billion a year, or £700 million, from 2026 to 2050, and that if we do not get on with the investment that we need, unchecked climate impact could cost Scotland £11 to £45 billion annually by 2050. That is not somewhere that anybody in the chamber wants to go, which is why we have been arguing so strongly for action and for the plan now, so that we save money and avoid negative impacts on our communities and businesses.

As Friends of the Earth Scotland observes, we have only six months left in this session of Parliament, and the Scottish Government has failed to produce its climate change plan and its energy strategy and just transition plan. I was going to intervene on Michael Matheson, because he announced the draft energy strategy and just transition plan in January 2023. In three months' time, that will be three years ago. We need action now.

It is not about the cabinet secretary getting everybody to agree on everything. That is not the point—it is about the plan. The reason why we will not vote it down tonight is that we do not want to delay it beyond the next election. However, we make the point that what is in front of us tonight is not good enough in relation to accountability, bringing businesses with us, giving certainty, and getting the investment going that is needed now.

Some 280,000 houses are currently vulnerable to flooding. With rising sea levels and increasing extreme weather, that number will only go up. We urgently need to act.

Over the next few weeks, we will work constructively in discussion with the cabinet secretary and her team, but we need everyone, right across the Cabinet, all public bodies, and all our councils, to work together. Scottish Labour, the Greens and the Liberal Democrats have all called for more clarity, a plan, and clear action. Setting targets with no idea how to meet them is not good enough. We need to build consensus. It is about making progress.

We need to bring our constituents with us, and all businesses and communities need to see action. We need to have targets that we can all buy into, even if we do not agree with all the details. People need to have trust that their politicians will deliver the action that we all need in relation to jobs, supply chains, improving people's homes and getting the transport that we need everywhere. It is about having buses where people need them and trains that run on time and do not get delayed because of the climate emissions that are impacting on the railway network. All of that requires us to act together.

We will not stop these targets today. However, by abstaining, we are bringing them to centre stage. We are not getting enough from the Scottish Government. We need faster action. We will work constructively, but we need the plans now, on both energy and the climate change strategy.

18:28

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): It used to be said that the enemy of a good plan was the pursuit of a perfect one. Apparently, the modern version is to say that the enemy of a good climate change plan is the Scottish Government.

I want to make it clear that we on the Conservative benches want Scotland to decarbonise. We want Scotland to make the most of its vast renewable potential, with the economic opportunity that that brings, and we want an environmentally sustainable future.

The Scottish Conservatives, together with every party across the chamber, voted for the Climate Change (Emissions Reduction Targets) (Scotland) Bill in 2019 because we saw both the need to decarbonise, and the potential gains if we get it right. However, if we get it wrong—if we choose grandiose headline-grabbing promises over pragmatism—we risk sabotaging ourselves in a spectacular fashion. Not only will we fail to meet unachievable targets; we will harm our economy, spend taxpayer funds ineffectively, and force the

public to foot the bill. Sadly, that is just where we have ended up.

This Parliament has heard plenty of big, bold goals from the Scottish Government on climate change, but little in the way of detail on how it expects us to get there. When there is detail, it is usually late, unrealistic, or both. Let us take the target to convert 1 million homes to using heat pumps by 2030. That is a big, bold goal but, under scrutiny from the Conservatives, it soon became clear that the Scottish Government had given almost no thought as to how it would reach that objective or what the implications might be.

The Government had not considered whether the supply chain for heat pumps was strong enough to supply that many units or what it would do to ensure that. It had not considered who was going to install those million heat pumps or who was going to pay for them, never mind who was going to maintain them. When it eventually turned its mind to those questions, it was too late. It had set itself a goal and turned it into an own goal.

The future of the global economy is a race for energy and the resources that are needed to harness it. Who can produce, store and export the greatest amount most cheaply and most consistently? Scotland can be a leader in that race. In the same way that we built a global reputation for oil and gas, we can build, and are building, a global reputation for renewable energy. For Scotland to succeed in the race to net zero, our goal should not be to come first but to finish in a position of strength. That means using our skills, knowledge and energy resources to help the world to decarbonise and, through that, to help meet the costs of our own journey to net zero.

Whether by leading in the development of floating offshore wind, becoming a key manufacturing centre for subsea cables or combining our oil and gas knowledge with our renewable energy potential to become the dominant hydrogen producer in Europe, we can become a global renewables hub. The decisions that we make on how we decarbonise will determine whether our energy industry evolves and thrives in the new era of renewables or dies out. That means that we must not write off our oil and gas sector, but make it the foundation on which the renewables future is built. It means being willing to set aside an ideological opposition to nuclear energy and being willing to explore the potential to innovate technologies such as small modular nuclear reactors or even fission. It means accepting that we must be pragmatic if we want to retain the public's support for what is a necessary goal and that focusing energies on things such as cutting red meat consumption or punishing people for having to rely on their cars will achieve exactly the opposite outcome. It means taking the time to

prepare and plan for the future, taking into account how long it will take to reach targets in a practical way—not declaring proudly when we will arrive and then discovering that the only way to do that involves scaling Mount Everest wearing a T-shirt and flip-flops.

Fail to prepare and you prepare to fail. That is what we have seen time and again with the Scottish Government and climate change. My colleagues and I will not be supporting the passage of the SSI, not because we oppose decarbonising and renewable energy but because we cannot support an approach that prioritises getting it done over doing it right. We cannot support targets that, yet again, have been set without any notion of how we will get there.

18:32

Gillian Martin: I wish to be clear about sequencing. The Climate Change (Emissions Reduction Targets) (Scotland) Act 2024, which was passed with cross-party support, outlines the sequence of events that result in a final climate change plan. Under that legislation, the deadline for laying a draft climate change plan in Parliament is two months after the carbon budget regulations come into force. That is set in statute, and I have always been clear that that is the order in which the regulations and the plan would be developed. In fact, no other UK nation is compelled to produce a climate change plan in draft at the same time as it lays its carbon budget regulations.

Mercedes Villalba: Is it the Government's position that work should always be left until the final deadline? It is possible to bring things forward ahead of time.

Gillian Martin: I say with the greatest of respect that the work that is required to set out a climate change plan in draft takes months. That is because we may have to adjust some of our proposals on the basis of advice from the Climate Change Committee. We also need to speak to our Cabinet colleagues about what is possible within their portfolios, which I have done, and I am very grateful to them for their pragmatic approach and their suggestions.

I understand the urgency that is felt by most members across the chamber on tackling the climate emergency—I agree with them. I am afraid, however, that I cannot reconcile that sentiment with the prospect that some members may sit on their hands and abstain on the regulations.

I had hoped that my intelligence on, and my thoughts about, where members might go with the vote would be wrong, and that members would work with me in supporting the regulations, which are based on the advice from the Climate Change

Committee. Some members asked me to accept the CCC's advice—in fact, they wanted me to be compelled by that advice, no matter what it was, even well before we started to work on our climate change plan. I simply cannot reconcile that view with what I have heard today. However, it is not my job to tell members what it is politically expedient to do.

Brian Whittle: Will the cabinet secretary take an intervention on that point?

Gillian Martin: I want to address some of the comments that members have made in the debate.

Douglas Lumsden may be mystified, but the law is clear on the process; I have set that out clearly. No other UK nation has to bring forward a climate change plan in draft at the same time as it brings forward its regulations. The timing has been set out to the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee, alongside the carbon budgets.

It is a shame that members of other parties want to be associated with the rhetoric from Douglas Lumsden. I know that those parties have very different policy messages, but if those members vote alongside the Conservatives, I will find that quite disappointing, to be honest.

Patrick Harvie says that a plan must match the carbon budgets. The Climate Change Committee has made it clear to me and to others that it does not dictate the policies that we would use—that is up to Parliaments and Governments to decide.

As I said to Willie Rennie, the climate change plan will be a plan that matches the targets. If Parliament—

Patrick Harvie: Will the member give way?

Gillian Martin: I am getting the sense that Parliament is not going to vote down the targets, but most members look as if they are going to abstain. Again, I find that very disappointing.

Michael Matheson rightly pointed out the importance of stability and staying the course on our climate ambition. I was told very recently by a company—Hitachi—that is about to base itself in Glasgow that the reason it chose Glasgow as the location for its UK headquarters is that Scotland is staying the course on its climate ambition: Glasgow has set out its ambition to be a net zero city by 2030, and Scotland has set out its ambition to reach net zero by 2045. That is what brings in investment. In a very uncertain world, where we can provide policy stability and ambition, it is incumbent on us to do so.

Patrick Harvie: Will the cabinet secretary give way?

Gillian Martin: I will take an intervention from Patrick Harvie.

Patrick Harvie: Perhaps that is one reason why we are not seeing the investment in the clean heat sector that we could be seeing if the Government was giving crystal clarity. Does the cabinet secretary accept that the criticisms that have been made this evening are about not only process, but substance? The very areas in which the new climate plan needs to accelerate action are those areas in which the SNP has been slowing down, watering down, diluting and delaying.

Gillian Martin: It is about process, and the process is that we vote on the carbon budgets. We have set out our carbon budgets, taking on board the recommendations on the level of those budgets, and we have put them before Parliament to vote on today. That will set in train our delivering the draft climate change plan. I have said that it is my aim to give that to Parliament and the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee by the end of October. Obviously, it is up to the Parliamentary Bureau as to when that happens, but I have said time and time again that I want to give Parliament the greatest amount of time in which to scrutinise the draft climate change plan.

I reiterate that it is a draft plan, which can be altered and changed before we publish the final plan; I have set out a commitment to do that by the end of the current session of Parliament.

Sarah Boyack: Will the cabinet secretary give way?

Gillian Martin: I have only 30 seconds left, and I want to make some other points.

The Presiding Officer: I am afraid that the cabinet secretary must wind up.

Gillian Martin: I am disappointed that members may abstain on the vote, but it is for me to deal with my own disappointment. Nevertheless, I think that the environmental non-governmental organisations that got in touch over the past week to ask members to vote for the carbon budgets will also be disappointed, and the people who support those ENGOs and who want to see Parliament working as one—together—on climate action will be disappointed, too.

I would like to think that in the next few minutes, there might be some soul searching around the vote—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear the cabinet secretary.

Gillian Martin: —and that members who have set out their position of sitting on their hands may take the better option. They will be able to look those ENGOs and those people who want us to get on with this in the eye and say that they supported the carbon budgets as advised by the Climate Change Committee.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate on the draft Climate Change (Scotland) Act 2009 (Scottish Carbon Budgets) Amendment Regulations 2025.

Business Motion

18:39

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-19267, in the name of Graeme Dey, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a business programme.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees—

(a) the following programme of business—

Tuesday 28 October 2025

2.00 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Topical Questions (if selected)

followed by Stage 3 Proceedings: Land Reform (Scotland) Bill

followed by Committee Announcements

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

10.00 pm Decision Time

Wednesday 29 October 2025

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

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

followed by Stage 3 Proceedings: Land Reform (Scotland) Bill

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Approval of SSIs (if required)

10.00 pm Decision Time

Thursday 30 October 2025

11.40 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions

11.40 am General Questions

12.00 pm First Minister's Questions

followed by Members' Business

2.30 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.30 pm Portfolio Questions: Climate Action and Energy, and Transport

followed by Stage 1 Debate: Natural Environment (Scotland) Bill

followed by Financial Resolution: Natural Environment (Scotland) Bill

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Tuesday 4 November 2025

2.00 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Topical Questions (if selected)

followed by Social Justice and Social Security Committee Debate: Financial Considerations When Leaving an Abusive Relationship

followed by Stage 3 Proceedings: Land Reform (Scotland) Bill

followed by Committee Announcements

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 5 November 2025

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions: Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands; Health and Social Care

followed by Scottish Labour Party Business

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Approval of SSIs (if required)

5.10 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 6 November 2025

11.40 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions

11.40 am General Questions

12.00 pm First Minister's Questions

followed by Members' Business

2.30 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.30 pm Portfolio Questions: Social Justice and Housing

followed by Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee Debate: Strengthening Committees' Effectiveness

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

(b) that, for the purposes of Portfolio Questions in the week beginning 27 October 2025, in rule 13.7.3, after the word "except" the words "to the extent to which the Presiding Officer considers that the questions are on the same or similar subject matter or" are inserted.—[*Graeme Dey*]

Motion agreed to.

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

18:40

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is consideration of Parliamentary Bureau motion S6M-19268, on suspension of standing orders. I invite Graeme Dey, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, to move the motion.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees, for the purposes of consideration of the supplementary legislative consent memorandum on the Public Authorities (Fraud, Error and Recovery) Bill, Rules 9B.3.5 and 9B.3.6 of Standing Orders are suspended.—[*Graeme Dey*]

18:40

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife)

(Con): Parliament's prime duty is to pass effective legislation. I know that members will agree that that can be done only if effective scrutiny is undertaken by the Parliament and its committees. The legislative consent motion that will be debated tomorrow is important, as it relates to fraud prevention.

As was intimated by the convener of the Finance and Public Administration Committee, the Cabinet Secretary for Social Security and David Wallace of Social Security Scotland were asked to appear before that committee on 16 September because of concerns about an article that appeared in *The Scotsman* in August, which implied that the Scottish Government was unwilling to chase up £36 million of fraudulent benefit claims. That is a substantial sum of public money, on which the Finance and Public Administration Committee rightly sought to challenge the Government.

Presiding Officer, I am sure that you will agree that it is right that additional scrutiny takes place, just as it is important that we do not wave through LCMs without scrutiny. We accept that, in this instance, there have been issues relating to the timescales for deliberation at Westminster and at Holyrood, and the impact of the October recess on those. However, we wish to put on record that we believe that there should be the fullest scrutiny of all aspects of legislation. For that reason, we will not support the proposed suspension of standing orders at decision time.

18:41

The Minister for Parliamentary Business and Veterans (Graeme Dey): Amendments to the Public Authorities (Fraud, Error and Recovery) Bill that the supplementary legislative consent motion covers were tabled only on 3 October. The

supplementary LCM was also lodged on 3 October.

The United Kingdom Government has advised that the bill will reach the last amending stage on 15 October, while the Scottish Parliament is in recess. Therefore, the only options that I have are to seek to suspend standing orders so that the LCM can be considered by the Parliament before the October recess or to leave it until after the October recess, at which point the bill will have gone through the last amending stage.

On balance, I have taken the view that it is preferable for the Parliament to have an opportunity to consider the LCM while the Parliament's views can still influence the final form of the bill. That means suspending standing orders so that the LCM can be debated in the chamber tomorrow, prior to the recess.

Prior to reaching that conclusion, my officials sought the views of the Social Justice and Social Security Committee and the Delegated Powers and Law Reform Committee. The Social Justice and Social Security Committee indicated that it would prefer to consider the matter in committee but appreciated that the timing might mean that the LCM would need to be taken directly to the chamber. The DPLR Committee has signalled that it would be content for the LCM to go straight to the chamber.

I agree that the committees of this Parliament not having a scrutiny role is less than ideal, but the alternative to considering the LCM tomorrow is having no say prior to the bill going through its last amending stage. However, I offer the Parliament the reassurance that the Scottish ministers and our officials continue to impress on the UK Government the need to account for Scottish Parliament recess periods when timetabling legislation that requires legislative consent.

The Presiding Officer: The question on the motion will be put at decision time.

The next item of business is consideration of Parliamentary Bureau motion S6M-19269, on approval of a Scottish statutory instrument. I ask Graeme Dey, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, to move the motion.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the Climate Change (Scotland) Act 2009 (Scottish Carbon Budgets) Amendment Regulations 2025 [draft] be approved.—[*Graeme Dey*]

The Presiding Officer: The question on the motion will be put at decision time.

The next item of business is consideration of four Parliamentary Bureau motions. I invite Graeme Dey, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, to move motions S6M-19270 and S6M-

19271, on approval of SSIs, and motions S6M-19272 and S6M-19273, on designation of lead committees.

Motions moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the Social Security (Cross-border Provision, Case Transfer and Miscellaneous Amendments) (Scotland) Regulations 2025 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Winter Heating Assistance (Pension Age) (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2025 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Delegated Powers and Law Reform Committee be designated as the lead committee in consideration of the Contract (Formation and Remedies) (Scotland) Bill at stage 1.

That the Parliament agrees that the Economy and Fair Work Committee be designated as the lead committee in consideration of the Digital Assets (Scotland) Bill at stage 1.—[*Graeme Dey*]

The Presiding Officer: The question on the motions will be put at decision time.

Decision Time

18:44

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): There are nine questions to be put as a result of today's business. I remind members that if the amendment in the name of Màiri McAllan is agreed to, the amendment in the name of Mark Griffin will fall.

The first question is, that amendment S6M-19252.5, in the name of Màiri McAllan, which seeks to amend motion S6M-19252, in the name of Russell Findlay, on stopping illegal immigration and recognising its impact on housing, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There be a division. There will be a short suspension to allow members to access the digital voting system.

18:45

Meeting suspended.

18:47

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: I remind members that if the amendment in the name of Màiri McAllan is agreed to, the amendment in the name of Mark Griffin will fall. Members should cast their votes now.

The vote is closed.

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. My proxy vote for Paul O'Kane failed to register. I would have voted no.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Marra. We will ensure that that vote is recorded.

For

Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)

Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green) [Proxy vote cast by Ross Greer]
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Fulton MacGregor]
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Ind)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Choudhury, Foyso (Lothian) (Ind)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (LD)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)

Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab) [Proxy vote cast by Michael Marra]
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Russell, Davy (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Reform)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-19252.5, in the name of Màiri McAllan, is: For 61, Against 51, Abstentions 0.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is that amendment S6M-19252.4—[*Interruption.*] My apologies—since amendment S6M-19252.5 was agreed to, amendment S6M-19252.4 has fallen.

The next question is, that motion S6M-19252, in the name of Russell Findlay, on stopping illegal immigration and recognising its impact on housing, as amended, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)

Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green) [Proxy vote cast by Ross Greer]
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Fulton MacGregor]
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Ind)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Choudhury, Foyso (Lothian) (Ind)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (LD)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)

Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab) [Proxy vote cast by Michael Marra]
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Russell, Davy (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Reform)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S6M-19252, in the name of Russell Findlay, as amended, is: For 61, Against 51, Abstentions 0.

Motion, as amended, agreed to,

That the Parliament notes that the suspension of local connection referrals in 2022 did not change the rights of newly recognised refugees to choose where they settle in Scotland, nor did it prevent Scottish local authorities from referring households presenting as homeless to an English or Welsh local authority with which they have a local connection; reaffirms that Scotland is a welcoming nation to people fleeing persecution, seeking safety and who have been granted refugee status, ensuring that they can rebuild their lives in the country through the New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy; highlights action in Scotland to tackle homelessness and destitution, including new prevention measures in the Housing (Scotland) Bill, increased investment in affordable homes and the £4 million investment in homelessness prevention pilots, alongside the extension of rapid rehousing transition plan funding of £8 million into 2026-27, and calls again on the UK Government to urgently uphold the European Convention on Human Rights, 1951 Refugee Convention and 1967 Protocol.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S6M-19253.3, in the name of Richard Lochhead, which seeks to amend motion S6M-19253, in the name of Murdo Fraser, on backing Scotland's colleges and apprenticeships, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)

Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dorman, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green) [Proxy vote cast by Ross Greer]
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Fulton MacGregor]
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Ind)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)

Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Ind)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (LD)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab) [Proxy vote cast by Michael Marra]
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Russell, Davy (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Reform)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-19253.3, in the name of Richard Lochhead, is: For 61, Against 51, Abstentions 0.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S6M-19253.2, in the name of Lorna Slater, which seeks to amend motion S6M-19253, in the name of Murdo Fraser, on backing Scotland's colleges and apprenticeships, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)

Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green) [Proxy vote cast by Ross Greer]
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Fulton MacGregor]
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Ind)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Choudhury, Foyso (Lothian) (Ind)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)

Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (LD)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab) [Proxy vote cast by Michael Marra]
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Russell, Davy (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Reform)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-19253.2, in the name of Lorna Slater, is: For 60, Against 51, Abstentions 0.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-19253, in the name of Murdo Fraser, on backing Scotland's colleges and apprenticeships, as amended, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

The vote is closed.

The Minister for Business and Employment (Richard Lochhead): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. My app froze. I would have voted yes.

The Presiding Officer: We will make sure that that is recorded.

For

Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)

Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dorman, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green) [Proxy vote cast by Ross Greer]
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Fulton MacGregor]
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Ind)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)

Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Ind)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (LD)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab) [Proxy vote cast by Michael Marra]
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Russell, Davy (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Reform)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 61, Against 51, Abstentions 0.

Motion, as amended, agreed to,

That the Parliament recognises that future economic growth is reliant on providing the right opportunities to create good jobs that allow businesses to expand; notes the Audit Scotland report entitled, Scotland's colleges 2025, and the importance of continued investment in Scotland's colleges and skills system to support inclusive economic success, prosperity and job creation, including provision of around three quarters of a billion pounds in Scotland's colleges in 2025-26, and an additional £3.5 million for skills, through the Scottish Budget; acknowledges that this is particularly important in the thriving sectors, like those critical to realising the transition to net zero, and the shared opportunities of this; recognises the key role that colleges, employers and training providers have played in ensuring that 93% of school leavers have a positive destination, and providing apprenticeships and training to a record 39,000 individuals, and notes, however, concern about the impact of Brexit and the UK Government's migration system, which is contributing to key skills gaps and labour market shortages.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-19268, in the name of Graeme Dey, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on suspension of standing orders, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Ind)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Choudhury, Foyso (Lothian) (Ind)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green) [Proxy vote cast by Ross Greer]
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine)

(SNP)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab) [Proxy vote cast by Michael Marra]
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Russell, Davy (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Reform)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Fulton MacGregor]
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Abstentions

Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (LD)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 85, Against 0, Abstentions 26.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees, for the purposes of consideration of the supplementary legislative consent memorandum on the Public Authorities (Fraud, Error and Recovery) Bill, Rules 9B.3.5 and 9B.3.6 of Standing Orders are suspended.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-19269, in the name of Graeme Dey, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on

approval of a Scottish statutory instrument be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

The vote is closed.

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. My app did not work. I would have voted yes.

The Presiding Officer: We will ensure that that is recorded.

For

Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Fulton MacGregor]
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

Abstentions

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Ind)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Ind)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (LD)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green) [Proxy vote cast by Ross Greer]
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab) [Proxy vote cast by Michael Marra]
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Russell, Davy (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Reform)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 51, Against 25, Abstentions 33.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the Climate Change (Scotland) Act 2009 (Scottish Carbon Budgets) Amendment Regulations 2025 [draft] be approved.

The Presiding Officer: I propose to ask a single question on four Parliamentary Bureau motions. As no member has objected, the question is, that motions S6M-19270 and S6M-19271, on approval of SSIs, and motions S6M-19272 and S6M-19273, on designation of lead committees, in the name of Graeme Dey, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, be agreed to.

Motions agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the Social Security (Cross-border Provision, Case Transfer and Miscellaneous Amendments) (Scotland) Regulations 2025 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Winter Heating Assistance (Pension Age) (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2025 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Delegated Powers and Law Reform Committee be designated as the lead committee in consideration of the Contract (Formation and Remedies) (Scotland) Bill at stage 1.

That the Parliament agrees that the Economy and Fair Work Committee be designated as the lead committee in consideration of the Digital Assets (Scotland) Bill at stage 1.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Bowel Cancer Screening

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-18931, in the name of Edward Mountain, on bowel cancer screening. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament congratulates the Scottish Government in taking the lead in bowel cancer screening; understands that Scotland has the most sensitive level of screening in the whole of the UK; notes calls on the Scottish Government to continue to lead the way by working with bowel cancer charities to ensure that Scotland remains at the forefront of UK bowel cancer screening; congratulates all bowel cancer charities on their continued work, and notes that Stoma Aware Day/World Ostomy Day is on 4 October 2025, which, it believes, is vital in continuing to raise awareness.

19:01

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): It gives me great pleasure to stand up this evening to congratulate the Scottish Government on leading the way in bowel cancer screening across the United Kingdom. I take this opportunity to thank the more than 67 members of this Parliament who have supported the motion. That support and the fact that I am able to stand here as an Opposition member to congratulate the Government show a strength in politics that we should all be proud of.

This session of Parliament is probably different from a lot of previous ones, in that three MSPs have had a cancer diagnosis during it. I was delighted when I saw Ruth Maguire back in here earlier this month, but, along with other members of this Parliament, I was devastated when I learned that Christina McKelvie was not to come back.

One in two of us will get a cancer diagnosis during our lifetime. That is perhaps a good thing, if the diagnosis is for a cancer that can be treated. Every year, 4,000 Scots get a diagnosis of bowel cancer. That diagnosis often comes from doing what I have euphemistically called the poo test. People are sent a test kit every two years when they are over 50, and it is a very easy test to do. Actually, if anyone wants to do it earlier, they can get the test online. I checked to see how much that would cost and found that the cheapest test—which is double the sensitivity of the Scottish Government-approved test—costs only £20. Therefore, if any person in Scotland has any of the symptoms, such as blood in their poo, stomach pains, weight loss or a change in bowel habits, or a lump in their stomach, they should, of course, try to see their doctor, but, if they cannot, they should

buy an online test, because it can indicate a need to see their doctor at the earliest opportunity.

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): Let me say how sorry I am that I cannot be in the chamber to listen to Mr Mountain's speech in person. I also want to say how grateful I am that he continues his incredible work in raising awareness of bowel cancer and destigmatising and demystifying the issues before us this evening. I look forward to meeting him following his interventions at First Minister's question time and to hearing the debate this evening.

Edward Mountain: I thank the cabinet secretary for that intervention.

As I was saying, Scotland is leading in bowel cancer screening. The faecal immunochemical tests that NHS Scotland sends out have a sensitivity level of 80 micrograms of blood per gram of poo. We have led the way for a long time, but I have to say that I am now disappointed to find that Wales has caught up—as a Scotsman, I never like to see Wales too close to us when it comes to these things. Wales has equalled that target, so I believe that it is time to move on, and the following figures should help the Government in that decision.

First, we know that, if you catch bowel cancer early, at stage 1, there is a 90 per cent chance of survival after five years. If you catch it at stage 2, there is an 85 per cent chance of survival. However, if you catch it at stage 3, that drops to 65 per cent, and, at stage 4, it is 40 per cent. That indicates that the earlier you can catch it, the better it will be. If you catch it earlier, it means not only that there is a greater chance of survival but that less treatment is needed, at less cost.

No one really talks about treatment for bowel cancer, but it can be quite invasive. For me, it was radiotherapy, then chemotherapy and eventually surgery. The chemotherapy is a hard course to go through. It involves three hours of sitting in a room with other cancer sufferers, on a drip, getting your chemotherapy, and then two weeks of pills—12 pills, morning and night—and feeling pretty sick on the back of it. You are not able to do little things, such as getting milk out of the fridge, because you cannot touch anything cold. You are made to feel pretty tired by the treatment, and pretty isolated.

My view is that there is every reason why we should ensure that people can avoid the treatment. Let us be clear, too, that there is a huge cost in treatment to the national health service. The "Cost of cancer in the UK" report has shown that, if someone's cancer is caught at stage 1 or stage 2, the cost is about £33,000 in the first year; if it is caught at stage 3 or 4, the cost goes up to about £46,000. That is just for the treatment—it

does not include surgery. If someone goes for surgery, the costs can be huge. I know that personally, because I saw the bills related to my treatment. The total for surgery is probably the two figures that I have quoted, combined together, on top of the original costs. There is a huge cost to not catching bowel cancer early.

So, how do we catch it early? As I explained, in my opinion, increasing the sensitivity of the FIT would be the easiest way of doing that. I have discussed that with the Minister for Public Health and Women's Health, who I know takes a personal interest in the subject—she does not have much of an option, because I pester her about it the whole time. The cost of increasing the sensitivity of the test is that we will need more colonoscopies. I have done some research across Scotland, and I know that the average cost of doing a colonoscopy in the NHS is about £18,000. If you go private, you can get it done very quickly, and the cost is about £3,000. It does not take a lot of maths for me to be able to highlight the situation to members: if the costs for treatment are going to be close to £60,000, how many colonoscopies would we need per patient to make it justifiable?

My call to the Government, and to everyone, is that we need to catch bowel cancer early. We can do that by increasing the sensitivity of the test, and we should—to my mind—be pleased to know that there is no reason why we cannot do that if we train more colonoscopy teams across Scotland. I say to the minister that, if we cannot do that, we should rely on the private sector to deliver those colonoscopies. The benefits of that approach are that we will be saving Scotland money and saving lives—what is not to like about that?

Let us be honest: if we make the test more sensitive, Scotland will be leading the way again, which is where we should be.

19:09

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): I thank Edward Mountain for bringing the debate to the chamber. Bowel cancer is not a topic that we normally hear being freely discussed, so I thank him not only for bringing it to the chamber for debate but for being a man who is not afraid to speak about his health, and for being someone who was not afraid to speak out during his recovery and talk about his personal experience. I know that he gave folk courage and support by doing so. I also know that it is not easy to talk about things that have had a direct impact on you, especially when you are, as he is, a private person who is not in the habit of discussing publicly your private affairs.

Through you, Deputy Presiding Officer, I take the opportunity to say to Edward Mountain,

following our conversation yesterday morning, that talking about this does not make him vulnerable; it makes him brave, in my eyes. As I know, some folk are too feart to poop on a stick; they just want to bury their heads in the sand, and they would rather not know. However, he went for the test and then went viral with his diagnosis and treatment, and he should be proud of himself for that.

As a woman of a certain age who gets the letters from NHS Scotland that ask people to get tested or checked for various things such as asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, smears, mammograms and bowel cancer, I can honestly say that jabbing your jobbie wi a stick is a dawdle. You do not have to put it in a Tiffany box, like Sharon Osbourne used to do before sending it to folk she didna like—you just stick it in the return envelope and post it back to the NHS. It is as simple as that.

In his motion, Edward Mountain

“congratulates the Scottish Government in taking the lead in bowel cancer screening”

and recognises

“that Scotland has the most sensitive level of screening in the whole of the UK”.

I echo that sentiment and add my congratulations.

However, as good as that news is, we as the public, and as individuals, have a part to play, as well. We need to take control of our own health—nobody else is going to do it for us. I say that because, according to the Public Health Scotland statistics report that was published in March this year, for the two-year period up to April 2024, more than 1.9 million folk were invited to complete a home bowel screening test. Two thirds of those folk successfully returned their kit—a 66 per cent uptake. The report notes that

“Uptake was higher in females ... than males”.

However, although an overall uptake of 66 per cent sounds like good news, that still leaves a third—approximately 600,000 people—who did not return their test. We, as individuals and as a Parliament, can and must do better in getting the message out about how important that wee test is.

We must remember that bowel cancer is one of the most common cancers in Scotland. Scotland has the highest rate of bowel cancer diagnosis in the UK. However, early diagnosis is key, with nine out of 10 people surviving if bowel cancer is found early. Men are more likely to have a positive screening result than women, yet fewer men return their stick.

If I can get one message out tonight, it would be this: please do the test—if not for yourself, for your family. You do not even have to leave the comfort of your own home. As I said, if you are diagnosed

early, you have a 90 per cent chance of survival: nine out of 10 folk survive. How would you feel if a family member did not do the test because they were too feart and then left it too late? Do not be that family member—go jab your jobbie and stick it in the post.

19:13

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I am pleased to speak in support of this crucial issue, and I congratulate my colleague Edward Mountain on bringing the debate to the chamber, and on the courage that he has shown in speaking about the topic. I join him in acknowledging that Scotland is indeed leading the way on bowel cancer screening across the United Kingdom.

The time between testing kits arriving on the doorsteps of the over-50s, and of those who would not normally receive a self-testing kit, is crucial. That is why it is critical to get out the message about recognising potential symptoms to members of the public of all ages. It is essential, in order that they have some opportunity to recognise potential symptoms, especially as we know that, if bowel cancer is diagnosed earlier, the outcomes are much better.

We all know that our NHS in Scotland is stretched, but I pay tribute to the staff working on the front line, who go above and beyond expectations to ensure that patients are supported. Many cancer charities have admirably stepped up to the challenge: Bowel Cancer UK and Beating Bowel Cancer, Bowel Research UK and many others are leading the charge in coaching the public in recognising symptoms of cancer.

I pay tribute to the Scottish cancer coalition, which is a group of around 30 charities that decided to work together to address key challenges facing cancer patients in Scotland. Although it is not a public-facing body, it lobbies and engages with the Scottish Government and external bodies such as the Scottish Medicines Consortium.

As today’s motion says, stoma awareness day was last Saturday and it was vitally important. The theme for this year was stoma myth busters and its aim was to break down the myths and stigma surrounding stomas of all types. As well as promoting education and providing support for the stoma community, the day encourages people to share their stories to challenge misinformation and build a more supportive environment for patients who have to wear stomas.

From first-hand family experience, I fully understand the vital need for early diagnosis, as well as the treatment that can be given, because it

ensures that individuals who have a stoma can live a more normal life.

I also want to acknowledge where we are with the NHS, because it is essential that the NHS continues to get the support that it requires, alongside the many charities that support individuals financially and the volunteers who come to support and encourage. I truly commend them for the work they are doing to ensure that patients and families are supported.

I look forward to hearing from the minister about the measures that the Scottish Government is taking to ensure that we can continue this vital work for the communities that we represent.

19:16

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): I thank Edward Mountain for securing the debate and for his personal contribution to the Government's achievement. His willingness to share a personal diagnosis and his experience of treatment to raise awareness of screening and encourage others to come forward is very welcome indeed.

His story tells us that screening for this cancer really matters. Bowel cancer is one of the most common cancer types in Scotland, and those who are diagnosed early are 14 times more likely to survive. We know from the latest Public Health Scotland figures that more can be done, and although we congratulate the Government, we cannot afford to be complacent.

Of Scots who are eligible for screening, only about half of those who live in the most deprived areas took it up, compared to three quarters of those who live in the least deprived areas. That is a 22 percentage point gap and it is even wider than the inequality in breast cancer screening. Although men are more at risk, their uptake is lower, particularly in the most deprived areas.

Earlier today, I attended an Atos and Breast Cancer Now briefing at which I heard how mobile units can be targeted more precisely at hard-to-reach populations to increase screening uptake. In fact, Edward Mountain highlighted a suggestion that, where uptake for bowel screening is low, the NHS could use mobile units to reach people in those hard-to-reach communities. It would be useful if the minister could address what the Scottish Government is doing to increase screening uptake, particularly in disadvantaged areas.

It is not just about screening. Of those who are referred for a colonoscopy, seven in 10 had to wait for more than four weeks to receive it, and three in 10 of those waited for more than eight weeks. That is eight weeks of stress, anxiety and fear before getting answers.

Worryingly, last year, the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh warned MSPs on the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee that four in 10 stool samples containing blood are not followed up because of a shortage of colonoscopy capacity across NHS Scotland. I am told that the current threshold for investigation in Scotland is four times the trigger point that is suggested by the UK National Screening Committee. We can do better than that and build on the positive achievements today. Bowel Cancer UK, for example, has called for the Scottish Government to reduce that threshold so that positive bowel cancer screening tests are investigated and more early diagnosis can be made.

In its report, "Cost of cancer in the UK", Cancer Research UK tells us that the cost of treating bowel cancer increases the later it is diagnosed. It therefore makes economic sense to detect early. Some cancers are so complex and rare that the chances of being able to treat the patient and allow them to continue to live a normal life are currently quite low, but bowel cancer is not one of those.

I want to leave members with the story of a woman who had emergency bowel surgery at the start of June. She was told that she would have a follow-up appointment three months later to discuss the reversal of the procedure and the removal of the stoma bag. Her appointment on 10 September was cancelled; the new appointment on 24 December has since been cancelled. It was then 31 December, which has also been cancelled. Now, it is 7 April 2027. Yes, members heard me correctly—not 2026, but 2027, some 22 months after her surgery. *[Interruption.]* I am on my last line. Every stage of the patient journey is important and, to be frank, the way in which that patient has been treated is shocking and unacceptable.

The Scottish Government has done good work, but it can and must do better.

19:20

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): I thank my Conservative colleague and good friend Edward Mountain for bringing up this topic for discussion. My mother had a tumour in her bowel, went through the process and, luckily, survived.

We know that this subject is very close to Edward's heart, having announced three years ago that he was receiving treatment for bowel cancer. Many of us are fully aware of Edward's treatment for that condition and of the journey that he took. Since then, he has become a formidable advocate for bowel cancer awareness by encouraging others to look after their health and to

get checked for early signs of the disease. His commendable actions, together with his sheer determination and courage to battle bowel cancer, stand as a shining example to all of us here tonight. He has won great admiration from members across the political divide—deservedly so—for being so forthright and honest in his health battle. I am sure that we can all join to praise his resilience and advocacy.

As we have heard in previous members' business debates on cancers, it is often all about statistics—some are good, some are very worrying, and there are others that simply cannot be ignored as much as we would possibly like to. Bowel cancer is no different. It is the fourth most common cancer but, sadly, it is the second biggest cancer killer. Some 44,000 people in the UK are diagnosed with the disease every year and, tragically, just under half of them lose their lives, including 1,700 people here in Scotland.

However, we need not have that sorry outcome, as bowel cancer is treatable and curable if it is diagnosed early enough. In fact, nine out of 10 people will survive if diagnosed at the earliest stages—1 or 2. Key to saving lives is diagnosing patients earlier, yet only 40 per cent of cases in Scotland are caught before the disease has spread. That must change if we are to achieve our vision of a future in which nobody dies of bowel cancer.

Encouragingly, bowel screening uptake in NHS Dumfries and Galloway was just under 70 per cent between 2022 and 2024, which is higher than Scotland's national average of around 65 per cent. However, there are more than 160 new diagnoses of bowel cancer each year in my constituency, and the incidence rate is higher than the national average. The bowel cancer mortality rate is thankfully lower than the national average, although there are still more than 45 deaths from the disease in NHS Dumfries and Galloway annually. Presently, nearly 3,500 people in the area are waiting for a diagnostic test for bowel cancer, while 95 per cent of people in the constituency start treatment within the 62-day target following an urgent referral.

In the south-west of Scotland, the overall picture is looking promising, although much still needs to be done to improve the figures even further in the times ahead. There remains an onus on the Scottish Government to initiate bold steps to improve early diagnosis of bowel cancer and to improve patient outcomes. We have heard that one way to do that is to introduce a test with extra sensitivity, which I hope the health secretary and his minister who is in the chamber tonight will fully take on board as we strive to get the figures down even further.

Bowel cancer screening remains one of the best ways to diagnose people early, with the UK National Screening Committee recommending that people aged between 50 and 74 are invited to be screened every two years. Health experts say that screening can save lives, yet only 66 per cent of people who are eligible to take up the offer in Scotland do so. More must be done to encourage them if we are to seriously win the battle.

Another barrier that must be overcome to improve early diagnosis is that of the long-standing staff shortages in endoscopy and pathology services. Again, I urge the Scottish Government to act to relieve the pressure on diagnostic services by tackling workforce issues.

As my colleague Edward Mountain has shown this evening, this is a battle that can be won if the right ammunition is put in place. We owe it to him and others like him to give them a fighting chance.

19:25

The Minister for Public Health and Women's Health (Jenni Minto): I, too, extend my thanks to Edward Mountain for securing the debate and for his on-going efforts to raise awareness of bowel cancer and bowel cancer screening. Finlay Carson just described his action as formidable, and I agree entirely with that. Many of us here will remember that members received a stoma bag from Edward Mountain to raise awareness of stoma care—I am fairly sure that mine was tied to the door handle of my office. It was extremely effective and it brought the issue home to me in a very real way.

As the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care, Neil Gray, has said, he will meet Mr Mountain to discuss the five asks for improved stoma care, and I look forward to hearing the outcomes of that meeting. I assure Edward Mountain that, as Mr Gray has already indicated, we are keen to work with him to realise his asks.

I echo Mr Mountain's and Alexander Stewart's gratitude to bowel cancer charities. The Scottish Cancer Coalition, which consists of 31 third sector organisations, informs and amplifies our detect cancer early messaging. Bowel Cancer UK, as well as being a valued member of the bowel screening programme board, provided personal stories for our be the early bird campaign. Those are just two examples of the invaluable support that cancer charities provide to the NHS and the Scottish Government. More importantly, the support that they provide to people who are diagnosed with bowel cancer is a lifeline that can be huge at the most difficult of times, and I cannot express my thanks for that enough.

Finally, I thank everyone for their contributions today and for their obvious passion and concern. I

always find it very difficult to respond to this debate, because my father died of secondary cancer as a result of his bowel cancer not being diagnosed soon enough. On the flip side, one of my best friends was diagnosed early and I am very pleased about that. She and I are going to see Deacon Blue on Friday night—she is doing very well. It is easy to talk about statistics and percentages, but, as I have just illustrated, behind every cancer story is a personal one.

As we have noted today, Scotland was the first nation to fully implement the UK national screening recommendations, so the entire eligible population was offered screening. Along with Wales, we continue to have the lowest referral threshold, which means that more people are sent for investigative tests. That means that more cancer is detected early, when treatment is likely to be more effective, and more people are given the chance for another birthday, another Christmas, to see a child get married or simply to have more time with family and friends. We should never take that for granted. We should also not assume that we have reached the limits of what is possible, which is why we continue to consider advice from the UK National Screening Committee, which is an independent expert advisory group, and I have asked my officials to explore engaging with that group on eligibility criteria.

As many members have noted, with around two thirds of people returning their screening kits, we are exceeding the 60 per cent target. However, as Jackie Dunbar and Jackie Baillie said, that means that a third of people are not returning them. Those are often people in areas of high deprivation or who face other barriers that make screening difficult. I have no hesitation in saying that that is not where I want Scotland to be.

There are no easy fixes, but I assure members that we are working to find solutions. Some will seem to be small, but they will have significant impact. For example, Public Health Scotland is improving the bowel screening invitation letters to include a suggested return date for the kit. A pilot revealed that that simple step increases uptake. Work is also on-going to make it easier to request information in other languages and formats, which will increase accessibility for people across Scotland.

More broadly, the 2023 equity and screening strategy set out a vision to improve accessibility across screening programmes. It has resulted in all health boards developing bespoke inequality plans, and we now have an equity and screening network that allows experts to share what works and, just as importantly, what does not. Those initiatives might take time, but I am confident that we will see reduced inequality and increased

uptake across all screening programmes, including bowel cancer.

We will continue to make £1 million available annually to support that work. In 2026, we will also publish an updated equity strategy that includes the valuable input from third sector organisations. I have noted some of the contributions tonight that we will be considering.

I have heard the clear calls to lower the referral threshold. I am ambitious to make that happen, and that ambition is shared across the NHS. However, our ambitions must be delivered responsibly and take into consideration the impact on NHS services and individuals. As members have mentioned, without more capacity, a higher number of tests will result in delays for symptomatic or higher-risk patients.

We are working to overcome those challenges and to increase the detection of polyps and cancer. This year, we allocated more than £10 million to endoscopy services, building on our endoscopy and urology diagnostic recovery and renewal plan that was published in 2021. Those steps will make a difference, and our aim remains to work towards a lower threshold, but we can do so only when we know that it will truly improve outcomes.

Again, I thank Edward Mountain for his motion, and I urge everyone to complete their bowel cancer screening when they are invited to take it up. The few minutes that it takes can and does save lives—please do the test.

Meeting closed at 19:31.

This is the final edition of the *Official Report* for this meeting. It is part of the Scottish Parliament *Official Report* archive and has been sent for legal deposit.

Published in Edinburgh by the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body, the Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP

All documents are available on
the Scottish Parliament website at:

www.parliament.scot

Information on non-endorsed print suppliers
is available here:

www.parliament.scot/documents

For information on the Scottish Parliament contact
Public Information on:

Telephone: 0131 348 5000

Textphone: 0800 092 7100

Email: sp.info@parliament.scot



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba