OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

DRAFT

Meeting of the Parliament

Tuesday 4 November 2025

Business until 14:29

Session 6

The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Tuesday 4 November 2025

CONTENTS

Scottish Parliament

Tuesday 4 November 2025

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

Time for Reflection

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Good afternoon. The first item of business is time for reflection. Our time for reflection leader today is Mandy Evans Ewing, who is a humanist.

Mandy Evans Ewing (Humanist): Hello, and warmest greetings to everyone here, in this chamber, and beyond. Thank you for the opportunity to share some reflections this afternoon.

Recently, as summer transitioned into autumn, I celebrated being 60. Every year of my life, this season seems to take on a greater resonance. The palette and hues are broader and more vibrant. The leaves dance more joyously, the air smells more earthy and musky, and the light is more golden, more soft and more warm.

It is a time to reflect on the year's events, accomplishments and challenges; to consider what we have learned and how we have grown; and to release and let go of what no longer serves us, as the trees show us in the graceful shedding of their leaves. It is a time to embrace change, breathe and be still. It is a time to appreciate the harvest of our human spirit; the rich well of consciousness, emotion, reason, empathy, goodness, kindness, love, peace, purpose, inner strength, resilience and creativity that we have the capacity for; and the ability to have profound experiences of awe, connection and joy, which give motivation to live meaningful lives and work towards a better world.

May we be particularly conscious of how we use all that energy, for it creates our reality. We are all worthy of peace. May we be honest about what energy we bring to the table and what energy we are setting in motion.

The first law of thermodynamics states that no energy gets created in the universe and none is destroyed—it just changes form. Everything that we can examine contains an energy of vibration. All those vibrations coexist at the same time. It is to that vibration that everything and every person is connected, whether we are aware of it or not. The droplets that glisten on the spider's web in the garden remind me that our existence means that we inherently belong to the web of life and to our one human family.

Yoko Ono said:

"spring passes
and one remembers one's innocence

summer passes
and one remembers one's exuberance

autumn passes
and one remembers one's reverence

winter passes
and one remembers one's perseverance".

To give reverence to the world that we want to create—one of wisdom, justice, compassion and integrity—in every possible moment, may we find warmth and love in our own and one another's bounteous and generous hearts. Choose presence and peace over power and position, and elect love over fear.

Topical Question Time

14:05

Future Farming Investment Scheme (Grants)

1. **Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** I remind members of my entry in the register of members' interests as a partner in a farming business that applied to the future farming investment scheme, and as a member of the National Farmers Union Scotland.

To ask the Scottish Government how decisions on the award of offers of grants for the future farming investment scheme were made. (S6T-02727)

The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie): The FFIS was co-designed with the industry and prioritised a number of businesses and business types. As with any support scheme, applications were assessed using a bespoke scoring system and being in a priority group assisted in increasing an applicant's score but did not guarantee success. Given the level of demand, offers of grant were made to those assessed as delivering the best outcomes against the scheme's overall objectives.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: The scheme was supposed to help priority groups such as young farmers, new entrants to farming, tenants and island businesses, but only about one third of the total funding has gone to those groups. The figures that are available suggest that larger and longer-established farming businesses on the mainland of Scotland were successful, which has left many farmers and crofters struggling to understand what the scoring criteria were—some suggest that selection was just a lucky dip and others say that names were pulled from a hat.

Can the minister set out the process by which his officials decided who was successful? Was artificial intelligence used at all in the process? Can he explain why many applicants who met four or five of the priorities were unsuccessful while others who met none have been offered grants?

Jim Fairlie: I cannot talk to the specifics that Jamie Halcro Johnston raises, but I say clearly that I absolutely understand the frustration felt by any farmer who put in what they believed to be a very good application but who did not receive funding.

He asked me to set out the process. The FFIS scoring model applied six core objectives: business efficiency, business sustainability, environmental protection, greenhouse gas reduction, climate adaptation and public good. Funding requests were assessed to recognise realistic and proportionate applications, ensuring value for money. Equity adjustments were applied for smaller and lower-capital businesses and a 20 per cent priority multiplier was applied to new entrants, young farmers and small business tenants. Priority status alone did not guarantee funding, because, as I have already said, applicants also had to demonstrate strong alignment with scheme objectives and the ability to deliver measurable outcomes.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: Speaking on Radio Orkney this morning, the minister claimed that the scheme was co-designed with stakeholders and was as good a scheme as the Government could put forward in the time that it had to get that money out of the door as quickly as possible. However, information obtained by the Scottish Conservatives following a freedom of information request reveals that pressure on the timescales was caused by the cabinet secretary's demands that the scheme must be ready to go and to be announced at the Royal Highland Show. That was despite Mairi Gougeon's own concerns, expressed by her office, that

"we haven't had those meaningful discussions with stakeholders at an early stage and are presenting them with the complete package",

which is

"not in the spirit of the commitment that was made."

Is it not the case that the minister rushed out the scheme without proper engagement, which meant that millions of pounds of public money—funding that the farming sector so desperately needs—risks being spent on a scheme that will not meet its objectives and that has left thousands of farmers, crofters and agricultural businesses disappointed?

Jim Fairlie: That is quite simply not the case. The scheme was co-designed and we had numerous discussions with various stakeholders, including the National Farmers Union Scotland. A decision was made that we would make the scheme work for the communities that it was targeted at. The money has not been wasted: it has gone to farmers who have shown a clear appetite and are prepared to put in the time, effort and investment to ensure that they help us on our journey to create biodiversity, reduce emissions and make farming sustainable for the future, which is something that we should be very proud of.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): The future farming investment scheme has shown that there is an appetite across Scotland's agricultural sector to invest in sustainability, productivity and resilience. The Opposition is conveniently overlooking the fact that the Scottish Government provided more than £21 million to assist with that. How will the grant awards that were made benefit

Scottish agriculture? Does the minister agree that the lack of a fair multi-annual funding settlement from the United Kingdom Government represents—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): I want everyone to be able to hear what everyone is saying.

Emma Harper: Thank you, Presiding Officer. I will finish my final sentence. Does the minister agree that the lack of a fair multi-annual funding settlement from the UK Government represents the biggest impediment to our ability to increase our support for and investment in Scottish agriculture?

Jim Fairlie: I absolutely agree with everything that Emma Harper has said.

Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con): What a surprise!

Jim Fairlie: The Scottish Government is unequivocal—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: There is a lot of interest in asking supplementary questions and I would like to get everyone in. Minister, please continue.

Jim Fairlie: I repeat that the Scottish Government's support for Scotland's farmers and crofters is unequivocal. We have provided a novel approach through the FFIS to deliver up-front investment to the sector to deliver on Scottish Government objectives.

The UK spending review failed to recognise Scotland's greater share of the UK landmass and seas and their potential to contribute significantly to the UK's climate and nature restoration targets. Instead of the long-term funding certainty that was available to us during our European Union membership, we now have an inadequate settlement within the United Kingdom that does not keep pace with the funding that Scotland received before we left the EU.

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): We have already seen changes introduced by the Government that have a negative impact on our island farmers and crofters, such as the 410-day calving interval and aspects of the whole farm plan. The minister gave assurances that he would be cognisant of islanders' needs when bringing forward policies, yet only a tiny fraction—less than 1 per cent—of the funding is going to the Western Isles, as highlighted by Donald MacKinnon, an active crofter and former chair of the Scottish Crofting Federation. We also hear reports of a huge number of rejected applications across the Highlands and Islands.

Why was less than 3 per cent of the funding used to support islanders despite there being no shortage of applications? Was an island communities impact assessment carried out?

Jim Fairlie: Rhoda Grant raises a number of points in that question. There is absolutely no way that what we have done has excluded crofters or islanders. We have the croft house grant scheme and the crofting agricultural grant scheme, so there are funds available—[*Interruption.*]

Presiding Officer, I am having real difficulty hearing. I keep getting chuntering from the left side.

The Presiding Officer: I am having difficulty, too. I am keen to bring in everyone who has pressed their request-to-speak buttons, and that would be more straightforward if we could get through the questions and responses.

Jim Fairlie: I would really like to try to give some proper answers to the questions, so I beg your forgiveness for asking members to stop talking.

There is no way that islanders have been downgraded in the scheme. We were very clear that we wanted young farmers, crofters and new entrants to get the funding. However, people were not guaranteed to get funding just because they were in those categories, because applications had to be robust in relation to the objectives in the first place.

We had a total of more than 7,000 claims, but only 4,000 of them were actually eligible. There have been some calls to look into why certain claims in certain areas were not taken forward, but they were not eligible for a range of reasons. I am happy to write to the member to tell her what those reasons are.

The overall picture is that the scheme has demonstrated a huge appetite from the members of the farming and crofting community. They want to get involved in the scheme and we want to make sure that we are delivering on that. We have kept the basic support for farming, the Scottish upland sheep support scheme and the voluntary coupled support. In those schemes, Scottish farmers are absolutely in line with the work of the Scottish Government, because we are doing them by co-design.

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): There will be winners and losers when any scheme comes to fruition, but I have been taken aback by just how many people have been angry and annoyed that they have been unsuccessful in this case because they are clearly part of the priorities of the scheme—they are young farmers, new entrants, tenants and island businesses.

When the minister saw the provisional results, did he drill down to see why those priority groups were not successful? He has just told Parliament

that 3,000 of the more than 7,000 applicants were not eligible. Did that information go back to the applicants? Most of the people that I have heard from were told just that they were not successful, and not that they were not eligible. Will the minister provide a regional breakdown of the numbers of applications that were submitted and the numbers that were successful so that we can see the success rate in each constituency and region across the country?

Jim Fairlie: I am absolutely happy to provide the information that Douglas Ross has asked for. On the point about a breakdown, we set out the scoring system and the funding that was available, but the scheme was massively oversubscribed. That goes back to the point that I made to Rhoda Grant. Farmers and crofters are clearly prepared to work with us, which is what we have been asking them to do, in order to meet our demands to reduce emissions, create biodiversity and be more efficient.

Although there is an awful lot of negativity, because people are disappointed—and I absolutely accept that people are disappointed—that demonstrates to me that we are on the right road and are trying to do the right things for our farming communities. I will continue to work as hard as I can to make sure that we continue to deliver for them, so that they can help us on that journey.

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): We were told that islanders, new entrants, young farmers and tenant farmers would be prioritised in the application of the funding. However, Orkney, which is one of the country's most agriculture-dependent areas, accounts for just 3.7 per cent of successful applications and 3.5 per cent of the total budget. Shetland and the Western Isles have fared even worse. As Douglas Ross said, there has been no explanation for those decisions, which has left farmers in my community astonished, confused and genuinely angry. I get that demand for the scheme was high, but given the Government's stated priorities, will the minister explain why it appears that islanders have fared so badly under the scheme?

Jim Fairlie: We will drill down into all the details of what the applications were. As the member will be aware, to come to the specific answers that he has asked for would involve drilling into a huge amount of information. I am more than happy to share that in writing.

I go back to the point that I have made from the start: the scheme was massively oversubscribed, which demonstrates the willingness of our farmers and crofters to be involved in the journey to reduce our emissions and create biodiversity. We will continue that.

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): This weekend, my inbox has been full of emails—many from agents who have had less than a good experience. They have submitted multiple applications on behalf of priority applicants such as young farmers, new entrants and environmentally focused business, but with minimal success. In some instances, farmers have gone for exactly the same equipment; one has hit the priorities and got nothing, but others have hit zero priorities and got funding.

It is also concerning that, from what the minister says, it appears that no farmers have been told whether they were ineligible; rather, they were unsuccessful due to the scheme being oversubscribed. How many farmers were ruled out as a result of the scoring methodology that was used, and why were applicants not given the opportunity to justify their choices? Will the minister commit to publishing the scoring framework and outcomes on each individual application, to ensure transparency, and will he commit to urgently engaging with agents to inform improvements to future schemes?

Jim Fairlie: I will not commit to sharing scoring on every single application. I will not use Government resources to that extent, because that would be a massive effort.

On Finlay Carson's first question, which was about ineligibility, there were a number of reasons. According to my figures, 3,539 people—47 per cent—were not prioritised for funding because they did not meet one or more of the eligibility and compliance requirements. There is a range of what those were: no active farmer; a failure to meet the minimum activity status; not being registered with or approved by the Scottish Government rural payments and inspections division; incomplete or missing investment details; unsupported or inconsistent investment; invalid email addresses, which create a notification risk; previous schemes not having been declared; the application having exceeded the minimum grant threshold; and the recovery ratio being below 30 per cent. There are a range of issues as to why some people were not eligible.

However, I reiterate that we will take the learnings. I bear in mind that the scheme was very generous. We were giving 100 per cent grants for equipment, in order to give farmers the best opportunity to get it. Perhaps we need to rethink the 100 per cent grant. We will ensure that the kind of support that we are putting in place—which is working for Scottish farming—is better targeted in the future.

Ambulances (Waits)

2. **Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what action it will take in

light of reports that some people are waiting 10 hours for an ambulance. (S6T-02733)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): It is not acceptable that some people are waiting for extended periods of time for an ambulance. Officials continue to hold regular strategic meetings with the Scottish Ambulance Service to help it to manage system pressures. The Scottish Ambulance Service is actively engaging with boards at chief executive and senior management level to ensure that they implement measures to reduce delays.

It is important to consider that ambulance crews responded to 547 life-threatening incidents during the week of 20 October, achieving a median response time of eight minutes and 20 seconds.

Our support for the Scottish Ambulance Service has led to a record increase in staffing, with new staff including newly qualified paramedics, patient transport service staff and control staff.

Jackie Baillie: Last week, a footballer with a suspected dislocated knee, who had been playing in a championship match, was left waiting for an ambulance for 10 hours. A month earlier, another footballer waited for five hours after suffering a double leg break. At the time, the First Minister described that wait as an "error", but now it looks as though it was not a one-off but a repeated problem.

Those are just two examples of the thousands of Scots who are left waiting because the Scottish Ambulance Service is struggling to meet demand. Ambulances are stuck waiting at the front doors of hospitals for more than an hour to discharge patients, which means that they are unavailable to take other calls. What is the cabinet secretary doing about that particular problem to reduce long waits for ambulances?

Neil Gray: There are a number of points in Jackie Baillie's question that I wish to cover. She is correct to point to the case of Charlie Fox's suspected dislocated knee. Having suffered a knee dislocation 20 years ago, I recognise the trauma and pain that he will have been suffering, which makes the delay even more difficult to understand.

Off the back of the other case that Jackie Baillie referred to—the case of Brooke Paterson, in October—we commissioned the Scottish Ambulance Service to undertake a review of the management of traumatic fractures of patients who were injured outside and could not be moved safely. The terms of reference required a full review of the management of those incidents in the past six months and the triage protocol for them, taking into account the escalation measures in times of higher demand, the capacity of the Scottish Ambulance Service's integrated clinical hub to review a larger proportion of 999 calls and the processes for identifying patients who are outdoors on the ambulance control systems.

Jackie Baillie is correct to say that turnaround times are affected by the pressures on hospitals. We know about some of the sites where particular challenges exist. Through the use of flow navigation centres and other triage work, work is being done to relieve the pressure on the Scottish Ambulance Service and hospitals. Jackie Baillie will also be aware of the work that is being done with local partners to reduce delayed discharge, so that more people can move back into their homes and be treated there in the longer term through the likes of the hospital at home work.

Jackie Baillie: I am glad that the cabinet secretary acknowledges that there is a problem. In 2014, one in every 100 ambulances spent an hour stuck on a hospital forecourt. By 2025—this year—the figure was one in three. This week, 2,007 Scots waited for more than 12 hours in accident and emergency departments, and we are not properly in winter yet.

At the weekend, former Scottish Government health secretary Jeane Freeman said that the Scottish National Party Government has failed to listen to NHS staff. That is why it is getting it so wrong. Does the minister agree, or is Jeane Freeman wrong?

Neil Gray: No. I will come back to the points that Jeane Freeman raised shortly. The pressures that we are facing in our hospitals are not unique to Scotland. They are pressures that all health systems across the United Kingdom have faced since Covid. Indeed, the deterioration of ambulance response times in England demonstrates the pressure that there is on all parts of the system. [*Interruption*.]

I can hear Jackie Baillie chuntering away, but the category 1 and category 2 ambulance response times in England in September were the slowest since February 2025, and the category 3 and category 4 response times were the slowest since December 2024. The point that I am making is that that does not excuse the situation that we are facing in Scotland—far from it. The decisions that we are making mean that we are in the best possible position to respond.

I want to ensure that the review that we have commissioned from the Scottish Ambulance Service to ensure that those types of incidents are responded to properly is acted on as quickly as possible. The outcome of the review and the collaboration with the senior management team at SAS is happening now. An urgent implementation plan will be agreed and monitored to ensure that we can respond to the concerns that Jackie Baillie has raised.

Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP): I remind members that I am employed as a bank nurse by NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde.

I thank our incredibly hard-working staff and my colleagues in the NHS and the Scottish Ambulance Service, who are working day in and day out to reduce delays and bring down waiting times. I am sure that Jackie Baillie will welcome the recent statistics that show that waiting times are coming down in Scotland. How will the First Minister's announcement yesterday of additional funding for nine health boards further help with that?

Neil Gray: First, I thank Clare Haughey for acknowledging the incredible efforts that are being made by our staff. In this case, the focus is on our ambulance staff, who operate in incredibly challenging situations and to whom I am incredibly grateful.

Secondly, we are seeing increased activity rates. We can see that from the statistics that have come out today on cancelled operations. We have seen a 4 per cent year-on-year increase in the number of operations that are being performed and planned. We have seen activity rates go up, and waiting times—the longest waits—are coming down. Again, that is in contrast to what is happening in other parts of the United Kingdom.

The £25.5 million funding increase that was announced on Monday brings our total additional investment in reducing waiting times to £135.5 million this year. That is dedicated funding as part of the record £21.7 billion that has been invested in our national health service. I point out that that was investment that the Labour Party could not support.

Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con): I declare an interest as a practising NHS general practitioner and a previous head of medicine for Queen's Park.

Queen's Park defender Charlie Fox suffered a serious knee injury during a championship game that could have resulted in an unnecessary amputation. He was forced to wait for 10 hours, which is the equivalent of almost seven football matches. In some areas, patients are waiting even longer than that. We know that, in the past year, one code red patient in the Highlands waited for more than 18 hours for an ambulance, while another in Lothian waited for almost 17 hours. The median wait is of cold comfort to those patients.

Our paramedics do a brilliant job, but they are left to do it with one hand tied behind their back. There are also home-grown student paramedics who are not getting jobs in Scotland. When will the Government put a proper focus on workforce planning and prioritise getting resources to the front line and away from bureaucracy?

Neil Gray: We have already done that. As I did in response to Jackie Baillie's question, I apologise to Charlie Fox for the situation that he faced. I recognise the pain and trauma that he will have suffered while he was waiting. I am expecting the Scottish Ambulance Service to carry out a full investigation into what happened in that incident. When the time is right for Mr Fox, I would encourage him to engage with the Ambulance Service to ensure that the investigation can be done in the most informed way possible.

I have already set out, in response to Jackie Baillie, the work that we have commissioned the Ambulance Service to do to review the management of traumatic fractures, to ensure that such incidents—or, indeed, dislocations, which we have heard about—are able to be responded to properly and timeously.

We have invested significantly in Ambulance Service staffing and that has led to a record increase in staffing, including for newly qualified paramedics. I am obviously aware of the situation for some, and I am working with the Ambulance Service to ensure that, where a newly qualified paramedic's number 1 geographical area is not available, we can at least support people to understand where the vacancies are and can match them up to those newly qualified paramedics.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): The stacking of ambulances outside our A and E departments and the long, protracted waits inside A and E are not a result of a deficiency in emergency care. Instead, they are a result of the fact that, on any given night in Scotland, 2,000 Scots are stuck in hospital who are well enough to go home but too frail to do so without either a care bed or a care package to receive them into the community. That is because this Government has failed on social care.

Does the cabinet secretary recognise that the situation in our communities is getting worse, particularly in the Highlands, which is seeing care homes close? Will he instruct an urgent inquiry into all preventable deaths caused as a result of the crisis in emergency care?

Neil Gray: I share Alex Cole-Hamilton's assessment of some of the challenges that are being faced around the delays that are being suffered by people who need to use the Ambulance Service and, indeed, by people in accident and emergency.

There is an issue with flow through the system, which is why we are bolstering general practice through the investment that we are making there to support more people in primary care. That is also why we have invested record levels in social

care, going beyond our previous commitments to invest in social care to the tune of £2.2 billion.

I recognise that there is significant demand on social care. That is why it is so important that, in addition, work is being done to expand hospital at home services to support people in their own homes for longer, including for people who have such an acuity of need that it is a challenge to meet their social care needs. I look forward to the discussion that we are about to have in 15 minutes, when we can discuss more of these issues, as we do regularly.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes topical question time. I apologise to those members I was unable to fit in.

Published by the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body, the Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP

The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba